

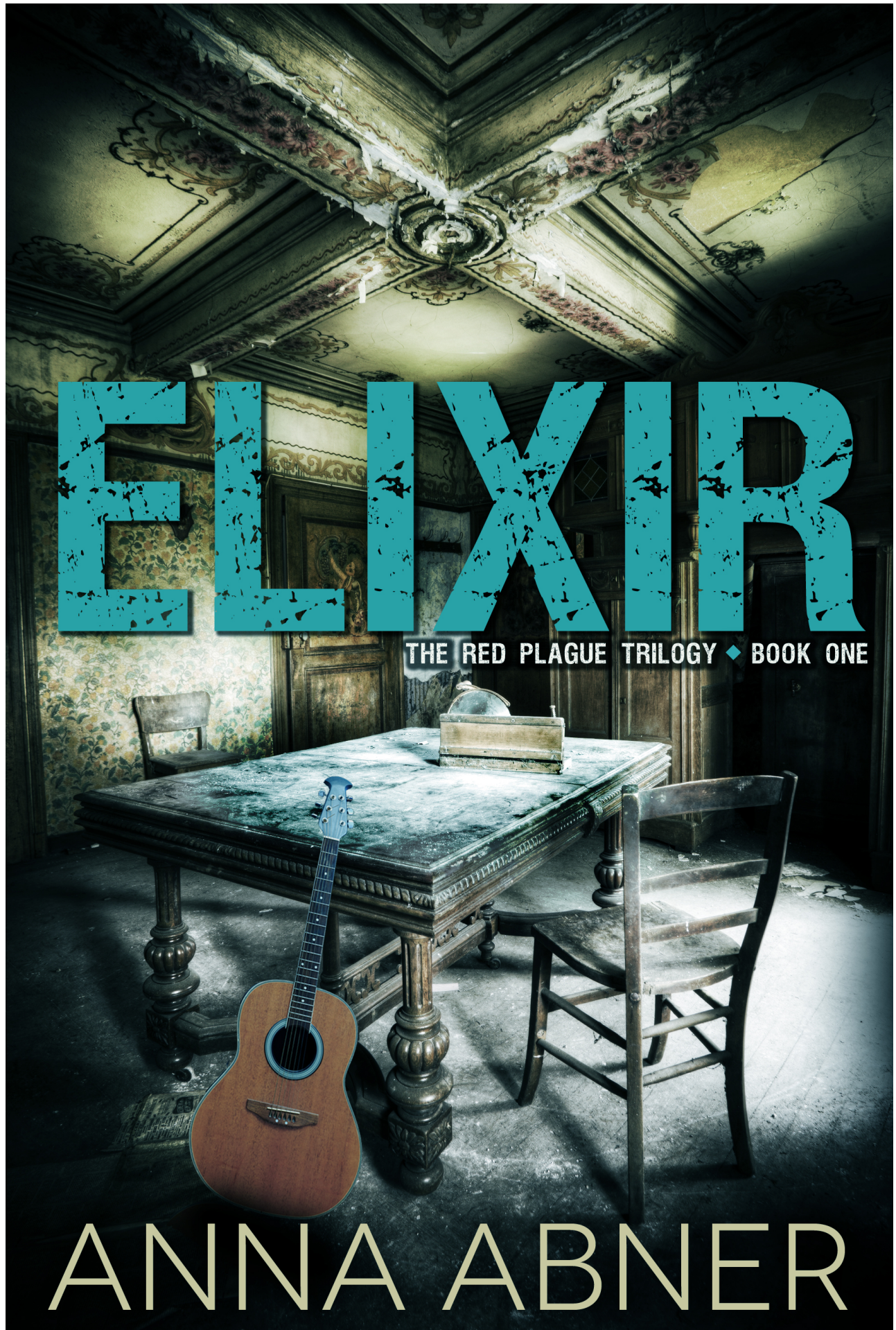
A Sneak Peek of The Red Plague Trilogy

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Table of Contents

<i>Elixir</i> (Red Plague #1) Cover.....	3
<i>Elixir</i> (Red Plague #1) Blurb + Chapter One.....	4
<i>Antidote</i> (Red Plague #2) Cover.....	13
<i>Antidote</i> (Red Plague #2) Blurb + Chapter One.....	14
<i>Panacea</i> (Red Plague #3) Cover.....	20
<i>Panacea</i> (Red Plague #3) Blurb + Chapter One.....	21
Grandma Abner's Apocalypse Bread Recipe.....	27





Elixir (Red Plague #1)

Back Cover Blurb:

The red plague has devastated the human race, turning billions of people into zombies with red eyes and an insatiable hunger for human flesh.

The 212R virus sweeps through the population so quickly a possible cure is left to rot. Seventeen-year-old Maya Solomon may be the only survivor who knows where it is. But to reach the lab in Raleigh, North Carolina she will have to outrun the infected boy tracking her every step and cross into a city swarming with monsters.

Chapter One

A buzzing circular saw woke me five minutes before my alarm was supposed to go off. Instant, achy terror consumed me. I scrambled out of bed in my PJs and crouched at the end of the hall, peeking around the corner into the living room beyond the foyer.

"Dad?" I hissed.

He stood, hands on hips, in front of our big screen TV staring at local news.

I sagged against the wall in relief. For a moment I'd thought... But no. We weren't being attacked by red-eyed plague victims.

Dad hadn't heard me, but around and between his arms I watched the agitated news anchor struggle through her report.

"If you are in a heavily infected area," the hollow-eyed brunette read off the teleprompter, "you are instructed to shelter in place. Do not attempt to travel. Roads and highways are impassable, particularly in Raleigh and Charlotte. The safest thing for you to do is stay where you are. Lock your doors and windows and wait for further instruction."

A tiny hiccup of fright escaped my throat, and Dad whipped his head around. His normally slicked back blond hair was dry and messy as if he hadn't bothered to comb it at all.

"Maya," he exclaimed, pasting on a friendly smile. But under the positive facade I could tell he was just as terrified as I was. The world was falling to pieces and we both knew it. "Good morning, baby girl. Did the construction wake you up? I told them not to make noise until after six."

Baby girl. He hadn't called me that in two years. Not since Mom's funeral.

"Dad," I said, twisting my fingers around a long tendril of dark hair. "What is going on?" I had fallen asleep worried about the incredibly fast-moving 212R virus and woken up in a construction zone.

"Oh." He glanced through the kitchen archway toward the saw noises. "These men are building a survival bunker in the pantry. I think I mentioned it last week. It's like a panic room, but it won't require electricity."

"Why do we need that?" Was I not panicking enough? 212R was infecting densely populated urban areas and, after three days of fever, stripping the diseased of their higher level thinking skills and replacing them with insatiable cravings for raw flesh and blood. Victims were crawling all over the larger cities. We were safe, for the moment, in our suburb. But we might not be for long.

"Don't worry about it," he said, showing me another fake smile, making me even jumpier. "It's an insurance policy. Get dressed and we'll have breakfast."

I slipped into my bedroom and tugged on my track gear—shorts, tee, and cross-trainers—in record time to catch up to Dad and one of the construction workers at the kitchen island.

Dad pulled stacks of wrapped twenties from his shoulder bag and slid them across the granite counter toward the man.

"It's more than I told you," Dad said quietly. "Can you finish before two?"

"No problem, boss." The man glanced at me. "With the four of us working nonstop it'll be done in a couple hours."

"With an independent ventilation system?"

"Exactly like we talked about."

"Sanitation station?"

"Roger's putting in the piping now."

I cleared my throat. "Do you want cereal, Dad? There's some oatmeal left."

He flinched as if he'd forgotten I was there. "Baby girl, make whatever you want. I have to go in a minute."

My belly plummeted. "You're going to work?"

The television, the small one next to the toaster oven, was tuned to cable news. On the screen was a fuzzy snapshot of an infected man, his face splattered with blood and his eyes a distinct and deep shade of red.

The news anchor said hotly to his guest, "We will not call them the Z word, Professor. They are

ill and need our support, not our ridicule.” He choked up, covering his mouth for a moment.

“My mother has been sick the last couple days. Her eyes went red last night.” He inhaled a shaky breath. “I won’t stand for that kind of language. Not on this show.”

On the right side of the screen was a cautionary graphic with bullet points. Stay indoors. Conserve energy. Boil water and keep it in sealed containers. Phone calls for emergencies only.

“I’m sorry.” Dad used the remote to turn off the TV. “You don’t need to watch this nonsense. It’s all posturing and fear mongering.”

Well, they had succeeded. I was terrified. “Should I stay home from school?”

“No,” Dad said. “The virus isn’t here yet. The best thing for you to do is go to school, see your friends, run track, just be *normal*.”

“But the news —”

“It’s bad in the cities,” he agreed, “but we’re not in the city. If 212R is here, it’s new. We have time.”

Up to three days. That’s how long it took the infection to invade a body and take over completely.

“Your lab is in Raleigh,” I reminded him. “It’s not safe there.”

He cupped my face, and though his touch was gentle, his fingers were tense as talons against my cheeks. “A cure exists, Maya, but I have to finish synthesizing the antiserum. If all my staff shows up I can finish it today. *I have to go*.”

I opened my mouth to argue further. He was one chemist toiling in a Center for Disease Control lab full of scientists and technicians. What difference would his absence make, honestly, in the grand scheme?

“I can put an end to this,” he said, his voice turning husky with emotion. “I can fix everything. I can *save* them.”

I saw in the set of his jaw and the steel in his spine I was not going to convince him to stay.

My stomach unraveled like an old scarf. “But you’ll come home tonight?”

“Of course.” He backed away, gesturing to the counter by the sink. “On your way to school, will you return Mrs. Kinley’s dish? It’s been sitting here for a week.”

“Okay.”

“I’m sorry I’m in such a hurry,” he said, collecting his satchel, keys, and cell phone. “The CDC is sending a helicopter to pick me up.”

I walked him to the front door, getting that itchy feeling I used to get when he dropped Mason

and I off at day care years ago. I didn't want him to go.

"Don't forget," he said, pausing at the threshold, "wash your hands constantly. Carry sanitizer with you. No shaking hands. No hugs. Eat and drink from sealed containers only."

"I will, Dad." I'd heard his cleanliness rules so often, especially in the last few weeks when 212R was all anybody could talk about, I knew them by heart.

"Come home tonight," I pleaded one last time. Since Mom died and my twin brother Mason went away, Dad was all I had left. "Promise me? No matter how much work you still have to do?"

"I'll come home. And I'll bring a generator for the bunker." He kissed my forehead and drove off in his car.

I had almost forgotten the workers banging away in my kitchen until I shut the front door and came face to face with their crew leader.

"Any little extras you want in there?" he asked, smacking his lips as he studied my hair. "Since your daddy is paying for it. I can throw in carpeting. Would you like that? What about a bulletproof peephole?"

Tucking my hair behind both ears, I edged toward the hallway and my bedroom. "Sounds good. Thanks."

I twisted my hair into a bun, packed a bag with a change of clothes, my copy of Shakespeare's sonnets for English class, and my school binder. Before leaving my room I hesitated in the doorway staring, unfocused, at my honey colored guitar. Holding it in my arms, strumming the strings, and feeling the chords' vibrations in my ribcage was the best part of my day. But it would be a pain to carry it from class to class so I left it behind, promising myself to play it when I got home.

I left the house in a hurry, snatching the baking dish off the kitchen counter on the way out.

Mrs. Kinley opened her front door, but only after I knocked five or six times. And when she did, her hair usually in a sleek ponytail down the back of her neck laid loose and wild.

"Maya, what are you doing out there?" She yanked me inside, slamming the door and locking it behind me. "Are you watching the news? It isn't safe."

"Have they closed the schools?" Maybe I wouldn't have to go after all, no matter what my dad thought.

"Not here. But they did in Raleigh." Her cat Freckles darted across the room as if she had a ghost on her long fluffy tail. "They're closing down the whole city. This zombie plague is ridiculous."

The Z word, the word we weren't supposed to say.

"Do you know what they just said on TV?" she added. "Reds can't speak." Her eyes filled with

unshed tears, and she reached for my hand. Her fingers were cold, but strong. "Isn't that the saddest thing you've ever heard? Even if they wanted to communicate, they physically can't."

Extricating my hand, I tried to smile reassuringly, but I feared it was more of a sneer. "It's sad."

"The saddest," she said, turning back to the box she was packing on her living room sofa.

"My dad went to work in Raleigh," I said. "He's trying to finish a cure."

"Bless his heart." Her words were kind, but her eyes were resolute as if she'd already written him off. "Do you want to stay here with me until he gets home?"

"I'm going to school," I announced bravely, though I felt anything but. "I just wanted to give this back." I showed her the dish. "Thanks again for the brownies. They were really good."

"My pleasure." She pulled me in for a longer and tighter than normal hug, and I rested my chin on her shoulder. Enveloped in Mrs. Kinley's soft, sweet smelling arms, I missed my mom more than ever. "Be safe. Not even our little corner of the world is immune to all this." She waved her hand toward the living room to encompass the news on the TV.

"I will." Readjusting my backpack I crossed her lawn and slid behind the wheel of my car, a rinky-dink coupe my dad had bought for me to practice on.

Palmetto High School was practically deserted. And it wasn't just students ditching under the threat of plague. Half the teachers were absent and only a handful of subs showed up to cover their classes. Lots of kids crammed into classrooms they wouldn't normally be in.

But my track coach was right on time and ready to sweat.

"I hope you delicate flowers came to work," Coach greeted us. "No bird or pig or, I don't know, *raccoon* flu is going to stop us, right?"

I glanced to my right at the three other runners who'd shown up to morning practice and nodded woodenly.

"That's what I love to see." Coach blew her whistle. "Warm up mile. Let's go, ladies."

I took off, quickly outpacing my teammates.

My best event was the one thousand meter. I was fast on a normal day. Maybe the panic and anxiety helped fuel me because I was better than fast. I was a machine in drills, not even caring about the humid, North Carolina air hanging heavy and thick. As I sprinted sweat blossomed, coating me in sticky moisture, but I never slowed down. By the time the first bell rang I was wrung out. I showered in the locker room and hurried to first period.

My history teacher Mr. Coates had the TV on and nobody even pretended to study or finish assignments. We scooted under the television and absorbed live footage from New York and Miami,

the hardest hit U.S cities so far.

And North Carolina was right between them.

Infected plague victims, red eyes seeming to glow, swarmed the streets attacking and consuming people. Survivors jammed all major routes of transportation—freeways, train depots, airports.

“Lola Rodriguez had no way of knowing her first floor apartment would be attacked in the middle of the night by a 212R sufferer,” Daniela, a veteran reporter announced to the camera.

“Thanks to her quick thinking she not only saved her own life but the lives of three of her neighbors by waking them up and hiding them on a second floor terrace.”

They looped a short video clip of a Red climbing a staircase, getting about halfway up, and toppling over like a toy soldier on a shaky table.

“As we’ve learned in the past few days,” the anchor continued, “212R affects the inner ear. Sufferers will not be able to either rise or descend more than a few feet before feeling uncontrollably dizzy.”

I glanced at the windows. Red eyes, no speech, and an inability to climb. Oh, and an insatiable craving for raw flesh and blood. And they were out there, not that far away, in Raleigh and Charlotte.

The reporter wrapped up her segment. “If there’s one thing to take away from the last hour,” Daniela said, “it is to shelter in place. Please, *please*, if you are in any of the major plague centers immediately find a safe spot to be for the next few days.” She smiled sadly. “My heart goes out to those suffering, both victims and survivors. If you can hear my voice, stay safe. Stay vigilant. We will get through this.”

The show went to commercial at the same time the bell rang, and I nearly jumped out of my skin.

On the way out of the room, even though it was against the rules, I brought my cell out of my bag and texted my dad. “Did you make it to work?”

Seconds ticked by. A minute. I waited in the hall. Just as I was about to put it away and go to my next class I received a text.

“I got to ride in a helicopter! Everything good. Working hard. Are you in school?”

“Yes. I love you.”

“Love you too.”

The next three classes went about the same as first period. At lunch I did what I always did, slipped into the band room to play guitar with my friend Guinevere. But Gwen wasn’t there so I stuck a granola bar in my mouth, pulled a student guitar from its case, and plucked a couple notes.

I played an upbeat country pop song on my instrument. The kind of song I loved. Normally.

It rang false. Nothing about the world was light and snappy anymore.

The side door slammed open and Cal poked his head in, his cold, calculating eyes discovering me sitting all by myself. The very sight of him caused a sour fear to spike inside my chest.

On any other day there were enough people in the room to create a buffer between Cal and I, but it was just the two of us.

Apparently, not even the threat of infection and death could suppress his sadistic impulses.

"Hey dork." He grinned as he produced a chocolate milk grenade and pretended to bite an invisible pin from the top of the container. "Incoming!"

I abandoned the school's guitar and took off a split second before he threw it overhand, digging my feet into the carpeting and sprinting for the back exit to the soundtrack of his cackling laughter. The warm milk exploded against my hip, splashing me from shoulders to knees in sugary, sticky mess.

I ran hard across the grassy quad and toward the girls' locker room, not looking back.

"Attention students and staff," a voice boomed over the loudspeaker. I slid to a stop next to a soda machine and spun, but Cal hadn't chased me. "You are ordered by the county Sheriff's department to go directly home at this time and stay there." A pause. "A 6:00 p.m. curfew will be strictly enforced." Another pause. "God bless us all."

The emergency alarm screamed through the halls and pulsed from every classroom.

I hurried for the parking lot, joining the crowd of people headed the same way, and pulled my cell. "School's canceled," I texted my dad. "On my way home."

He didn't reply right away, but he kept his phone in his office, so if he was busy in the lab it might be a while.

The streets were congested and it took twice as long to get home. I steered my Honda with both hands fisted on the wheel. Twice, I narrowly avoided collisions with cars zigzagging through traffic.

My phone beeped. "Busy," Dad texted. "Move garage gear into panic room. See you tonight." I was too worried about dying on the road to stop and answer him.

The work trucks were gone from my driveway when I pulled up.

"Maya!" Mrs. Kinley came off her front porch with Freckles in a carrier. "Is your dad coming to get you?"

"He's in Raleigh," I said, "but he's been texting. He'll be home tonight."

"Okay." She popped the carrier into the backseat of her car. "I'm going to meet my parents in Nashville. You can come with me if you want. I'd love the company and 212R isn't as bad in the

country as it is in the cities.”

“I have to wait for my dad,” I said. “He’s really close to finding a cure.”

She smiled wistfully. “Wouldn’t that be wonderful.”

“Be careful out there,” I said and bolted myself inside my house.

I did what I’d been doing the last two weeks or so after school, as part of my dad’s safety checklist. I stripped to my underwear in the laundry room and immediately took a hot shower in the hall bathroom. Only then did I change into comfy pants and a tank top and inspected our new panic room.

The crew had done a good job. It looked solid. Impenetrable, even. Our old pantry was now a metal cell with a heavy swinging door that sealed from the inside with a wheel crank. I crossed the square of extra soft carpeting and decided I could live there for a few days. As long as my dad was with me.

Speaking of, I texted him again. “Panic room is done. Looks sturdy.”

While I waited for him to reply I made myself a sandwich and turned on the TV.

More bad news. Most of New York City was black and offline.

“The president has declared the entire city of New York a disaster zone,” the reporter said. “The National Guard is on the ground as we speak doing all they can to quarantine plague sufferers and evacuate survivors.” A video flashed on of a giant tank driving down a street choked with cars and people.

I didn’t feel particularly optimistic about the military response. The threat to the city was a microscopic virus, not anything that could be shot or detained.

Done with my snack I followed my dad’s directions. He’d been busy the last few weeks, even busier than I realized. Locked in our garage lay cases of drinking water and canned food, a first-aid kit, a tub of survival gear, and two narrow cots. I spent the afternoon sweeping up after the workers and moving and organizing the supplies into the old pantry.

“If you have a fever,” the news anchor announced, “go immediately to the nearest emergency room.”

I pressed the back of my hand to my forehead. So far so good.

“The best hope we have is to contain the virus,” the reporter continued. “Once infected, though, you can spot a ‘Red,’ as some folks are calling them, by the red color of their eyes. We now have Dr. LaVay from the CDC to tell us more about why and how 212R affects the color of our irises. Doctor?”

I turned off the TV and texted Dad, “Lasagna for dinner? I’ll start at 5.”

While I waited to hear from him I collected my guitar from my room and strummed a song I had written the year before called “Red Shoelaces.”

When the tray of frozen vegetable lasagna was hot and ready at six I served myself and ate in front of the television. Every five minutes or so I checked my cell to see if my dad texted anything and I had missed the beep, but nothing came in.

“Many of the services we take for granted,” the reporter said, “will no longer be available as early as tomorrow morning along the entire eastern seaboard. 212R has spread so quickly, incapacitating so many people, there may not be enough qualified people to run power, water, and sanitation services.”

I set my dinner in the trash and double-checked that all the doors and windows were locked tight and then turned on my phone. No new messages.

“We here at the news desk will keep reporting,” she added, “as long as we can to get you the information you need to stay safe. If the power in your area goes out, don’t panic. Scrolling on the screen right now are the radio channels broadcasting emergency information in your area. So, if you have a battery powered radio in your survival kit get it out and test the batteries.”

Something that sounded like a firecracker popped outside the front door. Then twice more.

Gunfire? I couldn’t be around gunfire. It reminded me of Mason and my mom and the horrible, awful thing that happened two years ago.

I ran to the window, but the street was deserted.

My cell screen was blank. No new messages, no new texts, no missed calls.

“Dad,” I whispered at my phone. “Where are you?”

The power blinked off, draping the house in quiet, purplish dusk.

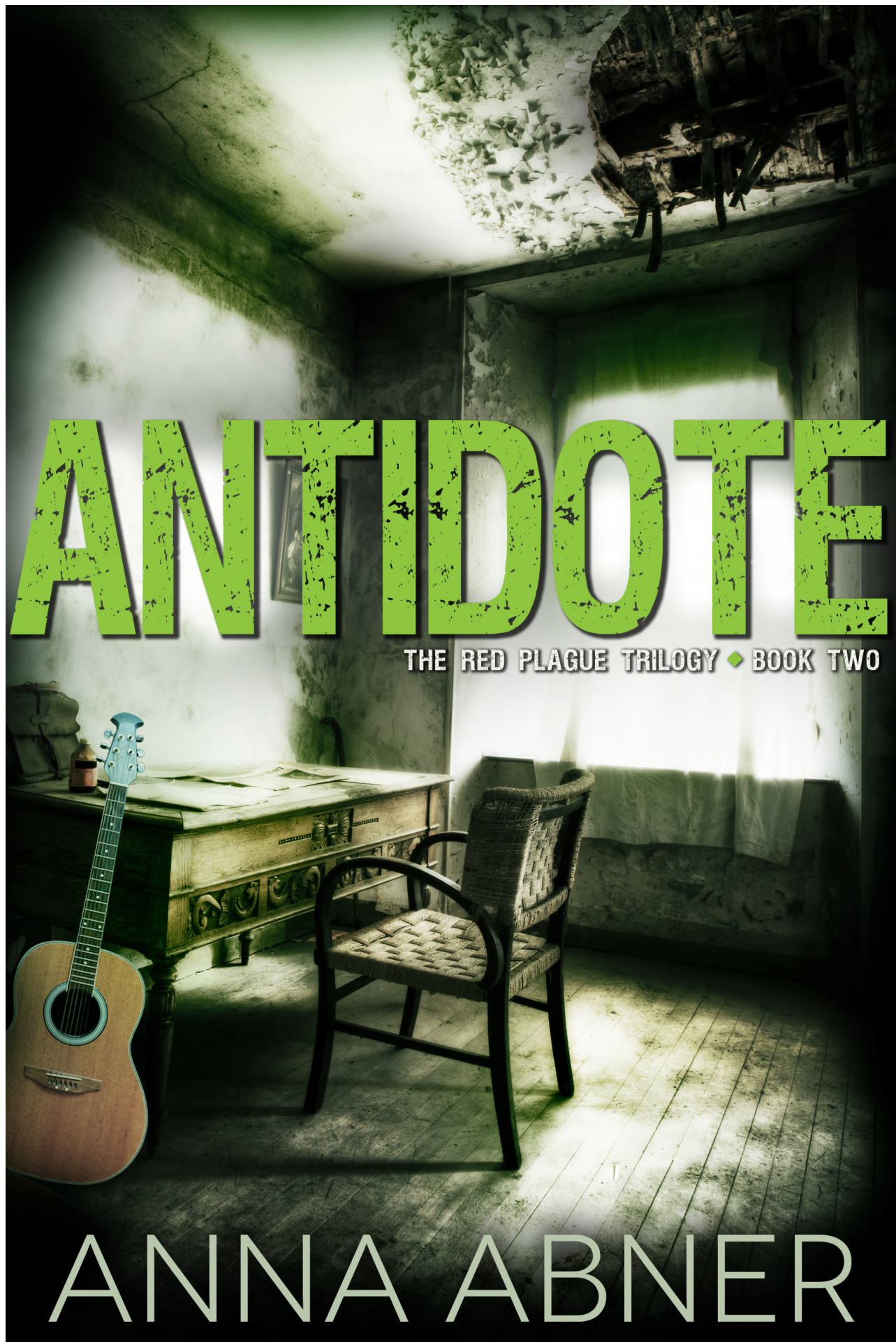
“Lights went out,” I texted Dad. “What do I do?”

Somebody outside screamed. The living room window shattered. Someone or something in the yard growled like a pissed off panther.

I snatched my guitar, my song diary, and my iPad.

The front door crashed open, and I ran for it, slamming the bunker’s door closed with a resounding *clank*.

To be continued...





Antidote (Red Plague #2)

Back Cover Blurb:

The red plague has devastated the human race, turning billions of people into zombies with red eyes and an insatiable hunger for human flesh.

The only known cure to the 212R virus is locked inside of Ben Sawyer. To get it out, seventeen-year-old Maya Solomon and a group of survivors will take him on a journey to what may be the last bastion of human civilization, Camp Carson, Virginia.

Chapter One

"Maya!" Pollard made a hard right, the RV bounced over a median, and I held Ben even tighter.

"He's a zombie. Back off."

"He injected the cure," I argued. "He's not a zombie anymore."

"You don't know that!"

"He said my name," I stated, still rocked by the memory of my name on his lips. I'd never heard a red-eyed infected person speak. No one had.

I felt the pulse at his throat and was rewarded with a strong thrumming against the pads of my fingers. Like plucking a bass guitar. His forehead, gritty beneath my palm, radiated heat. The fever had come on fast.

"Do we have Tylenol?" I called out. I didn't even possess a proper first-aid kit. And there were so many other things that could go wrong.

"Not that I know of," Pollard answered.

I wasn't even sure if a fever was normal in a person infected with 212R, the zombie virus. Maybe he'd had one all along.

"I can do this."

I had never done this. Over winter break I'd volunteered at St. Joseph's Hospital to make my dad, the chemist with two medical degrees, happy. I had alternated between stocking supplies my manager re-organized after I went home – which was awful – and trailing actual nurses as they did their work – which was awesome. One LPN used to narrate every single thing she did, from inserting

IVs to checking blood pressures.

But none of it had prepared me for this.

"Where are we going?" I asked. If we found a hospital or a clinic I might be able to scrounge medical supplies.

"Away from this nightmare," Pollard said.

Away from the flaming remains of my dad's CDC lab. Away from anything he'd made or left behind. All that was left of his work coursed through Ben's veins and nowhere else.

As gently as possible, I unbuttoned the top two buttons on his shirt and peeled the dark navy fabric away from his skin to inspect the gunshot wound. A dime-sized hole, surrounded by angry swollen flesh, stared back at me.

I replaced his shirt and something like rough paper in his breast pocket, the one over his heart, stalled my fingers.

I pulled out a wallet-sized school photo and immediately dropped it.

"Crap." Fumbling, I picked it up off the RV's dirty linoleum floor and stared into my own face. Mine.

To be certain, I flipped it over and my narrow, jagged signature adorned the back. Last Christmas I'd mailed the photo inside a care package to my brother Mason. It had been addressed to the Dogwood Juvenile Detention Center in Raleigh, North Carolina.

But if I'd mailed it to Mason, how had it ended up in Ben's shirt?

"Hang on to something," Pollard called.

I stuffed the pic into my pocket. If Pollard or Hunny asked questions about it, I had no answers, yet.

I tested Ben's pulse again, this time the one at his wrist, just to be sure it still beat. But my touch jumpstarted a chain reaction. His fingers twitched, and then the tremors spread to his arms and legs.

"Oh, no," I cried out. His legs spasmed and his head knocked against my belly and thighs. Hard. "Ben? Can you hear me?"

Fear twisted my insides into origami as I held him through full body convulsions. Finally, his muscles quieted. I checked and re-checked his pulse.

"What's wrong?" Pollard shouted.

"The medicine made him sick." Understatement. More likely, it had poisoned him and his internal organs were failing.

"You're not going to die," I whispered as his seizure faded to a few quivers in his hands. Not

with my father's only remaining elixir in his blood. "I'll take care of you." Whatever he needed. A bath. Decent clothes. Soft blankets and a pillow. How long had it been since he'd slept on a pillow? If he needed medicine, I'd find it.

I wanted to take care of him. Because with my father's antiserum in his veins, he felt a whole lot like family.

And I didn't have much family left. My gaze wandered across the interior of the RV from Hunny's blonde ringlets to the back of Pollard's head.

Pollard cursed loudly, clipping the rear end of a compact car and sending it spinning away. The RV swayed to the left and I knocked into the mini fridge.

"I noticed the neighborhoods are less crowded than the highways," he said.

On our two-day trip into downtown Raleigh, we'd stuck to major thoroughfares and been slowed down at every turn. Nothing but streets bottlenecked with abandoned vehicles, packs of red zombies, and overzealous snipers. I glanced down at Ben's dirty face. He'd be a major hindrance if we were forced to change vehicles, or worse, walk part of the way back to the truck stop.

"Get the map out," Pollard said. "Please?"

He swerved around debris, and it felt like the RV went up on two wheels for a moment, sending my stomach into a tailspin.

"Hunny," I called. "It's in my backpack." I was afraid to move. Afraid to jostle Ben, even a little bit, and maybe hurt him.

I shifted, positioning his head on my lap, and cupped the side of his face. To keep him still. To reassure myself he was still breathing.

The little girl, ringlets bouncing, leapt over the unconscious Red and rifled through my pack.

"Here," she said, returning to the front of the RV and handing the paper to Pollard.

"Spread it out," he said. "I'm not stopping this thing. Not for a single minute. It's too crazy out there." To prove his point, he waved at something on the other side of the extra-tall windshield. "You see that pack of zombies? Must be twenty-five of them." As we passed the pack by bouncing onto the sidewalk, Pollard checked the side mirrors. "And now they're running after us." He caught my eye over his shoulder. "We're gonna get out of here," he said, his usually pretty blue eyes steely with resolve. "I promise you."

With the map unfolded and laid out on the dash, he pointed at different sites. "We're about here." He glanced up and turned the wheel to avoid a decorative brick wall around someone's front yard. "We're going west through the suburbs," he announced, nodding as if convincing himself as

well as us. "Then we'll turn south and come up on the truck stop from the back."

"It took two days to get here the first time," I reminded him.

"It's not going to take that long." He smiled reassuringly at me in the rearview mirror. "On a good day I can drive there in twenty minutes. So..."

But since 212R had ravaged the human race, changing over ninety-nine percent of us into flesh-eating monsters, time seemed to pass differently. What had once taken a few minutes now took hours when you factored in the loss of electricity and scavenging for gas and hiding from Reds.

"Just hurry," I added unnecessarily. "We need a safe place to stop and regroup." To process the sight of my dad's empty and looted lab. Or the fire. Or Ben's injecting what I hoped was the antiserum. Or his saying my name.

Pollard was right. As soon as he passed through the heart of the city, there were fewer parked vehicles, less random debris, fewer Reds. He rolled over streets, driveways, access lanes, and sometimes even sidewalks and front lawns to keep us moving in the right direction.

"Maya?" Hunny climbed out of the passenger seat and stepped tentatively down the narrow walkway between the gas range and the dining table. "I saw snacks in your pack. Can I have some?"

I couldn't remember what was in there. "Of course." Then I recalled another helpful item I'd collected along the way. "And grab the baby wipes, will you?"

But she crept as far as Ben's boot and then hesitated. "What's wrong with him?"

I wiggled a little, changing positions, but kept his head in my lap. He didn't react, just continued sleeping against me. "He injected the antiserum to 212R." At least I hoped it was the antiserum. If it wasn't, he may have ruined everything by injecting himself with poison.

Hunny scrunched her nose. "What?"

"He took the cure," I said. "But probably the wrong dose. It's making him sick."

Her green eyes traveled up his body from his dirt-caked black boots over his stained blue work clothes to his blood-splattered face. "Are you going to be a zombie now? Because you touched him?"

"No," I said quickly. "If I haven't been infected yet, I probably won't be. Besides," I added, nodding at the back of Pollard's head, "he thinks we're immune."

"It's just a theory," he said, proving he was eavesdropping. "It doesn't mean you should touch him, Maya."

"I think it's a good theory." It made sense to me. No matter how catastrophic a virus was, there was always a fraction of the population naturally immune.

"What are you going to do with him?" Hunny asked. She nudged his boot with the toe of her

tennis shoe and Ben's leg wobbled, but he didn't wake up.

"Easy," I warned. He was a human being, not a toy. "I'm not going to do anything with him. He'll wake up," *I hope*, "and we'll find out if the antiserum worked."

She bobbed her head, but I sensed she had something else to say. Finally, she whispered low enough Pollard couldn't hear, "Maya, I took something."

My guts clenched. "What did you take?" And from where?

"I'm sorry," she said in a rush. "I know you told me not to, but it was just sitting there, and it was so cute and little."

"What did you take?" I pressed. We'd been in a lab where hazardous chemicals were stored. "It could be dangerous."

"No, it's not." She pulled a silver rectangle from her pocket and offered it to me. "Here. Look. It was on your dad's desk."

The moment it landed in my palm I knew what it was. Immediately, like turning a faucet, I teared up.

"It's me and my brother when we were little."

I opened the small, hinged frame and stared at a pair of black and white portraits, cropped to show just the faces and nothing else. At two, when the pictures had been taken, we'd looked so similar. We both had wispy black hair. The same brown eyes. Only our smiles were different. Mine was smaller, more hesitant. Mason grinned whole-heartedly, showing off tiny baby teeth.

"This is me." I touched the glass over my pale face, and then my twin brother's. "This is Mason."

So much had gone wrong since we'd taken the photos, but in the snapshots we were still young and sweet and the future seemed bright. Maybe that's why Dad kept it on his desk, even after Mason was incarcerated. Maybe he'd liked to remember his kids before the darkness descended.

I thought of the picture tucked into my pocket. Is that why Ben liked it? Did my face somehow remind him of his life before the plague?

"I'm sorry," Hunny said again.

I closed the frame and returned it to her. "It's okay. I'm glad you took it."

"You should have it." She tried to give it back. "It's yours."

"No." I shook my head. It hurt too much to look at. "Keep it. You can give it back to me later when you're done with it."

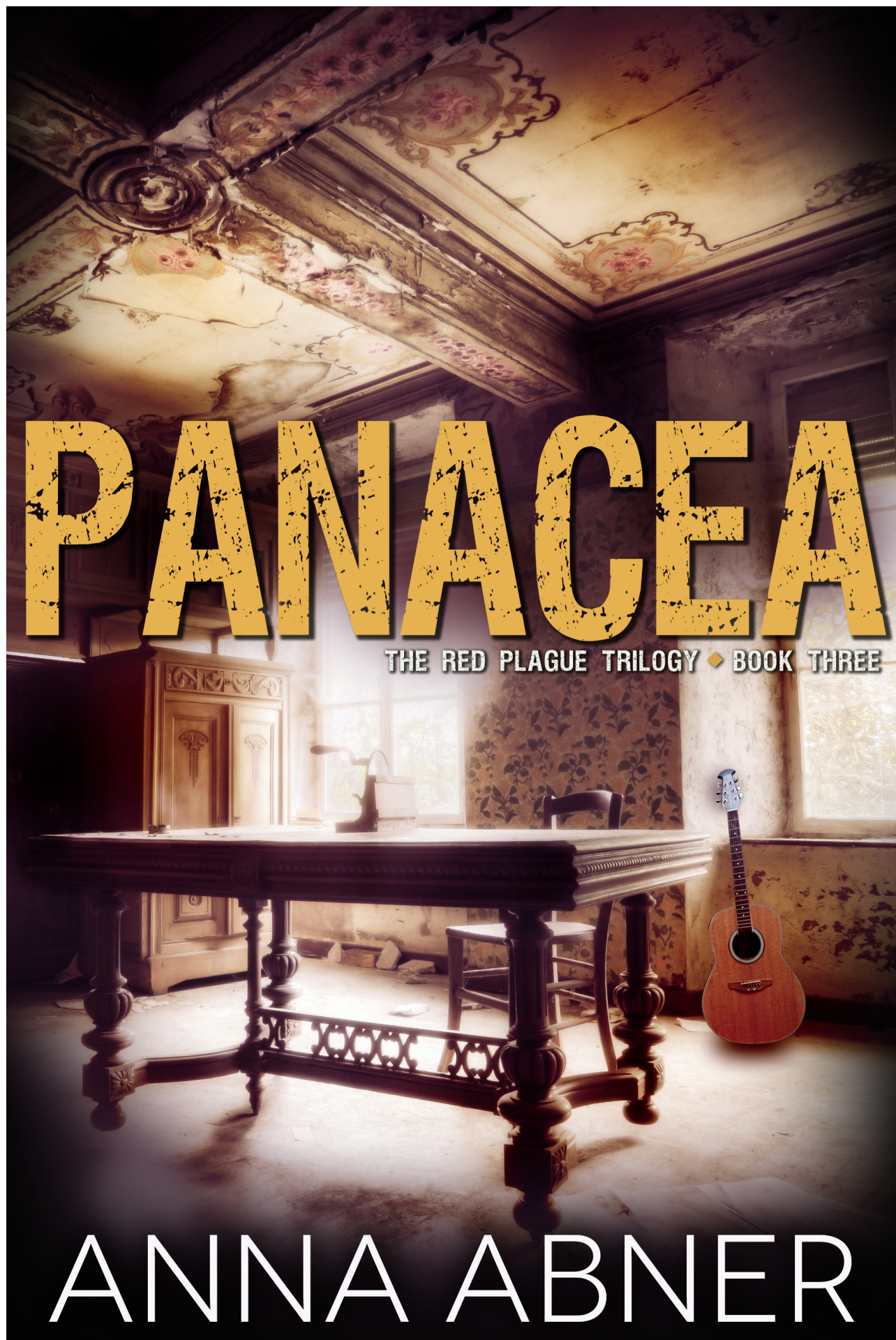
She wedged it into her pocket and unzipped my backpack. "Here." She handed me the wipes and then returned to the passenger's seat with a box of yogurt-covered raisins.

I scrubbed vigorously at my hands with a moist towelette, rubbing between my fingers and up both wrists. I repeated the process with a second cloth, removing layers of blood, dirt, and grime. No matter how hard I washed, though, I couldn't remove every mark I'd gathered since the red plague exploded out of South America and then the world. Maybe I'd never be completely clean.

There was so much blood caked on Ben's hands they looked black, but up his left arm was a fine misting of white paint. Evidence it had been him who'd written me a message on asphalt, and no one else. Proof he was different than most Reds. I reached to clean it off when the RV hit something so big I was weightless for an instant.

"Ladies?" Pollard announced, spinning the giant steering wheel. "We're almost there."

To be continued...





Panacea (Red Plague #3)

Back Cover Blurb:

The red plague has devastated the human race, turning billions of people into zombies with red eyes and an insatiable hunger for human flesh.

No closer to extracting the cure from inside Ben Sawyer, Maya Solomon is ready to give up her quest to cure the zombie virus. But Pollard and Hunny have gone ahead to Washington, DC in search of other survivors. Alone and vulnerable, Maya and Ben begin a final and treacherous journey north in the hope that somehow the secrets locked inside Ben's blood will finally free the world from the grip of the Red Plague.

Chapter One

I shoved open the door of our borrowed VW Bug and stumbled into several inches of gritty beach sand. Past a craggy dune, the Atlantic Ocean burst upon the shore. Over and over, undaunted. Behind me, Ben curled in the passenger's seat, his long legs bunched to his chest to fit the cramped interior. He hadn't woken when I drove hell-bent across fields and marshes to escape Camp Carson. He hadn't woken when the car stuttered to a stop, empty of fuel, on the Virginia beach. And he didn't wake as I stood over him, chewing at my bottom lip.

Smart had done more than lie about extracting my dad's antiserum from Ben's blood. He'd drugged him. Among other things. He might not wake up, not completely, until morning. Four hours or more.

He needed help, first aid, possibly a doctor, but all he had was me.

I searched up and down the beach. If a pack of quick-footed red zombies, sufferers of the 212R virus, found us, we had no protection except the car. So, not much protection at all.

"I'm going to search the trunk." He didn't answer, but talking to someone, *anyone*, made me feel better. "Okay, Ben?"

He flinched at the sound of my voice. The sedatives he'd been fed hadn't worn off completely. I grabbed his hand so he'd know he wasn't alone anymore. Reflexively, he squeezed back, his fingers twining with mine.

In the storage compartment I found a raincoat, but no emergency flares or forgotten bottles of sports drink. Certainly nothing useful. I tossed the coat into the back seat with my gear and then closed the trunk.

“Don’t worry,” I told Ben, “we’ll be fine.”

We probably weren’t going to be fine. Not alone and unprotected.

I turned toward the sound of the surf. “I just need a minute to make a plan.”

The whitecaps looked and sounded exactly the same as they always had. With all the chaos in the world and all the changes that had hammered down upon the human race, it didn’t seem right the ocean kept rolling across the earth, oblivious.

“I’m scared,” I signed at the horizon, my hands stuttering through the motions. Really, really scared.

But the surf kept washing upon the beach in a slow, quiet rhythm. *Tempo adagio*. Like a hymn. I hummed a counter-beat, and the sad melody I couldn’t shake returned.

Way down here ... I disappear.

The water was black as tar with the occasional silver reflection of starlight from overhead. I tried to stay out of the surf, but it was tricky in the dark determining the tide’s reach, and cold salty water splashed over my sneakers.

“Aw, crap.” I didn’t have spare shoes, which only reminded me that my survival knowledge was nil. I knew how to run, hide, and disinfect. That was about it. Because I came from a family of technology loving city folks, not rugged survivalists. For the millionth time I wished my dad hadn’t left to finish his antiserum for 212R. He may not have been able to teach me about hunting or shelter building during the apocalypse, but at least I wouldn’t have spent so much time alone.

But if Dad hadn’t left, he wouldn’t have finished the elixir and Ben would still be a Red. My dad had wanted his work to mean something. To help people. And it had saved Ben.

So, it was worth it. I just wished I had both of them, Ben *and* Dad.

I glanced over my shoulder, but the compact car was a shadowy shape across the sand. More than anything, I felt alone. For the first time since the plague it wasn’t a pleasant sensation.

Night stretched and lengthened, seeming to last forever.

Where was Pollard?

I shouldn’t have pushed to separate our group. I should have fought to stay together, but I’d been so sure the four of us—Pollard, Juliet, Hunny, and I—would be too visible, too loud, too obvious, breaking into Ben’s locked room. I’d argued to be the only one to pull off the rescue mission.

Maybe it hadn't been a good idea because everywhere I looked I saw only sand, water, and sky.

Pollard should've been on the beach.

But he wasn't, and I had no way of contacting him. 212R had infected so many people, and so quickly, there was no one left to run water, trash, and electricity services. No GPS, no cell phones. Wherever he was, he was out of my reach.

I walked south, but didn't catch sight of my friends. Or any human beings at all. Not even a single house or a forgotten beach umbrella. Pivoting, I marched north as far as I felt comfortable. Off in the distance I recognized roofs and a white fence. But that was it. No Pollard, no Hunny, no Juliet, and no sign they'd been anywhere near there.

Thirst drove me back to the car.

As for supplies, we were pathetically undergeared. In my backpack I carried my personal belongings, a canteen of water, some snacks, and a couple changes of clean clothes. An extra-long screwdriver. My short sword, a fully functional replica from the *Lord of the Rings* films that had been my dad's before the red plague. And the golden-hued guitar Ben had given me.

Definitely not enough to build a secure shelter and hunker down for days.

Depending on the temperature, my water supply might only last twenty-four hours. The same for the snacks.

And with Ben not in his right mind, everything fell to me to do. Except I wasn't any good at taking care of other people. I was okay at caring for myself, but awful at taking care of others.

I opened the driver's side door and reached between the seats for my pack and the canteen inside it. Because of the tiny interior I was forced to get very, very close to Ben. I tried not to disturb him, but my ribs brushed his arm. He snapped awake, and I squeaked in surprise, banging my head on the roof of the car.

"Maya?" he exclaimed, and then he scampered out of the car on all fours into the soft sand.

"It's me," I confirmed, climbing out and massaging the top of my head.

"What happened?" He used the car to push himself upright.

"We escaped from Camp Carson," I explained, glossing over the rough parts. Like the fire. The torture chamber. Unstrapping him from a gurney.

He turned in a circle, scanning the area, and then pinned his intense red eyes on me. "Are you okay?"

"I've been better." Muscles and joints I didn't even know I had ached. I stretched my arms over

my head, and my spine crackled like pretzel rods. "How do *you* feel?"

He was standing and alert, and he had color back in his cheeks. All good signs.

"I'm okay. How far are we from the base?" He squinted down the beach.

"I drove about fifteen miles-an-hour for two hours." Camp Carson was southwest of Richmond, but after traveling north and east I could no longer picture our location on a map. We definitely weren't near any big cities. "The car's out of gas. I haven't seen or heard anyone."

"Where's Pollard? And Hunny?"

I kicked at a clump of grass. "They left a hole for us to go through. I stayed behind to get you. We said we'd go straight east and meet on the beach."

"Did you go straight east?"

No. I had messed up. I should've forced Ben onto his feet and gotten us through the trees the night before, but I'd been so scared I'd wanted to get as far away from Smart as possible. He'd tortured Ben for days in his locked room, and I was scared he would follow us and recapture Ben.

And because of it, we may have lost Pollard and Hunny for good.

"There were woods to the east," I said. "I drove north until I found beach access. I guess they went a different way." Or, worse, went back to rescue us. If they had, they could be locked in Ben's old prison.

"Was there a backup plan?" he asked.

"Meet at the Washington Monument. Pollard thinks there might be people there."

Ben blew out a long breath. "Have you seen any sign of them at all?"

"I searched while you were sleeping. I walked up and down the beach but I didn't see anything. Not even a piece of trash blowing in the wind. It's too dark, but if I turn on a flashlight I might attract trouble."

"I need some fresh air."

I bit my tongue to keep from saying, "We're already outside. How much fresher can the air get?"

But he was determined and wobbled across the sand to the edge of the water. Just as I had done, he inched too close and wet his boots. Except he didn't jump back like I had. He stood in the surf and let it wash over his feet.

A memory of him strapped to a gurney in Smart's barracks room flashed in my mind. What had they done to him?

After he'd injected my dad's antiserum, I'd been so sure the right thing to do was get him to a doctor and pull the answer to reversing the red plague out of his blood. But Smart had lied to me. I'd

thought Ben was being cared for by the residents of Camp Carson. But as soon as they'd closed the door on him, they'd started the horror show. They could've done anything to him in there. Surgery. Amputation. Complete exsanguination.

One thing they hadn't done was extract the cure.

"Are you okay?" I asked hesitantly, afraid to spook him. I stepped closer, itching to feel his brow for fever, but I didn't dare. Not with him so unsteady.

"Stay away from me," he gasped. "For God's sake, Maya, just stay back."

I moved away so quickly I nearly tripped and fell on my butt in the sand. But I steadied myself and then kept a healthy distance between us.

Ben's expression was tense as he turned toward the churning surf. "I don't like being tied up," he growled. "They tied me up. Do you understand?" He sucked in a ragged breath. "It was like being in lockdown in Dogwood."

The Dogwood Juvenile Detention Center in Raleigh, North Carolina. The one Ben had been sentenced to. The same one my twin brother had been inside when the red plague hit.

Mason had been incarcerated when he was fifteen and ordered to serve time until his eighteenth birthday. A milestone he probably would never make. We didn't turn eighteen for three more months. If he hadn't escaped before 212R spread, then he would have been trapped inside the jail when chaos erupted. Theoretically, he could still be inside.

I shivered. "Can you walk?" I asked. Silly question. Ben was in no condition to walk. He could barely stand. "Nix that. I'll get you some water. You need to drink lots of fluids. Fruit would be nice." I was babbling like an idiot. We didn't have fruit. We were lucky to have clean, drinkable water.

"Here." I tossed the canteen at his feet so he didn't have to touch me. Or smell me. "Drink."

Whatever progress he'd made in the last few days seemed lost. He was just as unstable as the first day after injecting the elixir.

"It's not safe here." He took a long swallow from my canteen, and then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Carefully, he straightened his heavy boots, then the cuffs of his trousers, and then the sleeves of his black T-shirt. Finally, he rearranged his dark hair. "We have to keep moving."

"No." One thing was obvious. Some awful stuff had gone down in Smart's so-called lab and Ben had regressed to near zombie status. "It's two o'clock in the morning. We should stay here and sleep. At dawn, I'll forage in the woods." I glanced at the Atlantic Ocean rolling away from us. "Maybe I can even fish something."

"You said Pollard is going to Washington, D.C.?" He frowned as if piecing a puzzle together.

"Then we have to follow him."

"What? No." I advanced a step, and then reversed trajectory. "Sorry. I mean, you need to rest from," I eyed him up and down, "whatever happened. We don't have to rush into another trip." Because I wasn't even sure if Pollard was in D.C. Or okay. Or *alive*.

"You came back for me." There was a growly resolve in his voice. "I will take you to your Pollard."

"He's not *my* anything," I said quickly. "And you're not ready to go on another road trip."

"You should be part of a family, Maya, even if it's not your own family."

I huffed a laugh. Where had that come from? "I'm fine by myself," I assured. "Besides, I had a family. They're all dead."

But Ben had stopped listening. "Is D.C. north of here?"

"It has to be." There was no way I'd passed it during the night.

"Please pack our stuff. I just need another minute." He plopped onto the sand again, pressing his palms against his eye sockets.

"Headache?" I guessed.

"Mmm."

I left him in the sand to collect my backpack from the car, as well as my guitar and short sword. By the time I closed the Bug's door, Ben was back on his feet.

"I'll follow you." His pace would be my pace, even if it meant slowing to a crawl.

Without saying a word, he lifted the backpack right off my shoulders and walked up the starlit beach, veering away from the water where the ground was firmer and easier to navigate. I jogged to catch up.

To be continued...

Grandma Abner's Apocalypse Bread

Pretend it's the zombie apocalypse and you have only enough electricity in the generator to power the oven. The fresh milk and eggs have been substituted for dehydrated powder.

Ingredients



- 2 tablespoons yeast
- 2/3 cup dry milk with 2 cups water (or the equivalent to 2 cups milk)
- 4 tablespoons egg crystals with 6 tablespoons water (or the equivalent to 2 eggs)
- ½ cup warm water
- 8 tablespoons shortening
- 7 cups flour
- 6 tablespoons white sugar
- 2 teaspoons salt

Directions



Step One: Mix wet ingredients in a bowl with a spoon. Add shortening.

Step Two: Slowly add flour and dry ingredients. Mix well.

Step Three: Knead dough by hand until mixed and soft. Sprinkle extra flour on hands and counter as you knead.

Step Four: Raise the dough in a bowl (covered with a cloth) at room temperature for one hour.

Step Five: Grease inside of 13x9 glass baking dish with shortening.

Step Six: Knead dough again by hand until soft.

Step Seven: Separate dough into about 16 balls and roll smooth by hand, arranging them in greased dish.

Step Eight: Raise the dough in the dish (covered with a cloth) for another hour at room temperature.

Step Nine: Bake at 350 degrees for 20-25 minutes.

Wrap them up and stuff them into your backpack before you set out on the open road to find other survivors. Can be eaten warm or cold.



***When I was writing the Red Plague Trilogy I wanted the survivors to make a food item that was both a little unusual but also reminiscent of home. This is a family recipe that can be found in a 1977 church cookbook of recipes handed down in my family for generations.*

Works by Anna Abner

[*Spell of Summoning*](#) (Dark Caster #1)

[*Spell of Binding*](#) (Dark Caster #2)

[*Spell of Vanishing*](#) (Dark Caster #3)

Spell of Shattering (Dark Caster #4) **Available Spring 2015**

Dark Caster Boxed Set **Available Spring 2015**

[*Elixir*](#) (Red Plague #1)

[*Antidote*](#) (Red Plague #2)

[*Panacea*](#) (Red Plague #3)

[Dark Caster Boxed Set](#)

[“The Night Trevor’s Soul Came Loose”](#)

[“Shadow Cells”](#)

Biography

Anna Abner lived in a haunted house for three years and grew up talking to imaginary friends. In her professional life, she has been a Realtor, a childcare provider, and a teacher. Now, she writes edge-of-your-seat paranormal romances and blogs from her home in coastal North Carolina about everything supernatural. You can connect with her online at AnnaAbner.com. *Spell of Summoning* is her first novel.