

*Lies - Greed - Hatred - Betrayal - Abuse*



**MURDER**

*Red Written*

*A Novel by*

*P. J. Mayes*

# **“Red Written”**

## **Three Sample Chapters of a Novel**

**by**

**P. T. Mayes**

Copyright 2013 © P. T. Mayes

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

All rights reserved.

No part of the publication can be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, without written permission from P.T. Mayes

[www.ptmayes.com](http://www.ptmayes.com)

## Prologue.

Having crawled through mud and fought the storm (much like Michael Wells on the night he raided the Merchant's HQ, he thought) the stranger eased open the cottage door and stole into the dark, warm kitchen. Having carefully closed the door behind him he stood for a moment with his backside turned to the fire, his long leather coat steaming, wishing the ache of the road would leave his bones, if only for a moment. He sighed, stretched, noted that the brass hands on the ornamental clock on the shelf were edging past ten. No time to mollycoddle himself. Unburdening his shoulders of the backpack he let it drop beside the old rocking chair — it landed like it was full of stones — and glanced once, longingly, at the chair before taking the hunting knife from the sheath strapped to his right ankle. There was work to be done. Outside the rain lashed the windows and the wind wrapped itself around the cottage, trying to find a way in, shrieking at finding every entrance blocked.

Crouching by his backpack the stranger severed the wet knotted cords rather than attempt to untie them, and lifted the sodden flap. Inside he could see the old folder, a worn thing of brown leather, faded now almost to tan, that

contained nothing more than the most important manuscript in the world.

Twigs scratched a window pane.

The stranger turned and stared into the dark living room. His hand now gripped tightly the knife, ready to fight for his life.

Had he heard something move in there?

Surely not. He had circled the cottage several times before breaking in and had assumed it was empty, after all the lights were off and there was no signs of any movement from within. He remembered what they used to say about people who made assumptions.

His eyes searched the layers of dark for a human shape, or worse, a guard dog.

No, he must be mistaken. It would not be the first time his nerves had played tricks on him.

He forced himself to relax, allowing his pent-up breath to whistle between his stained, broken teeth, reminding himself that he was no longer in “enemy” territory. There was no danger here, at least not at the moment, but it wouldn’t hurt to double check.

Putting the folder under his coat for protection he stepped into the living room, and knew instantly he had made a mistake when he felt someone hiding in the dark slip behind him. Upon feeling the knife’s razor sharp edge at his throat,

trimming his scratchy and road-tangled beard, he froze.

“If I was you,” whispered the girl into his ear, “I wouldn’t move so much a muscle, just in case I slit your throat by accident. I’d hate for that to happen. Blood is so difficult to get out of carpet.”

The stranger, his face covered with a bandana of weathered calfskin, tried to turn his head, and got a nick for his pains. The knife was very sharp indeed, probably military issue.

“Ah, ah, that’s quite enough,” she warned him. “How did you get past the sentries?”

“On a night like this?” he said. “Easily.”

“If you hurt any of them, I’ll gut you like a fish.” She dug the knife under his jaw line, forcing him to stand on tip-toe. “Drop the knife.”

He did as he was asked. “Is this how you treat guests around here?” he asked with some difficulty.

“It’s how we treat *uninvited* guests. Who are you? What do you want?”

“Let me go and I’ll tell you.”

“I’m not that stupid.”

“Stupid enough to kill your own father?”

And with that the knife was no longer at his throat. Slowly he turned to face the girl who was now standing in a corner, hugging herself like a frightened child who had just seen a

ghost, the knife lying on the carpet between her feet.

“*Father?*”

“Yes, Rachel, it’s me.”

She shook her head. “No, that’s not possible. They said you were dead.”

“Yes, I admit it came close a few times, but as you can see, *they*, whoever *they* are, were wrong. I’m alive, and I’m *home*.”

With a strangled sob the girl flew into her father’s arms, not caring that his coat was wet through from the road. She held him for a long time, kissing his masked face on the cheek, at least until he gently pushed her away from him, finding her closeness awkward. So many years between them.

“Let me see you,” he said, reaching out to turn on a nearby lamp. The light was yellow and weak, but it was enough for him to see by. For a moment his eyes searched his daughter’s face, and then behind his mask he smiled.

“You’ve been a good girl.”

“I followed your teachings,” she said, wiping her eyes on the sleeves of her dressing gown. Suddenly she collected herself. “Oh, I’m forgetting my manners, you must be frozen! Let me make you some tea. That’ll warm you up.”

He tried to protest, say that he wasn’t thirsty, but that would have been a Lie, and anyway the girl had already

hurried into the kitchen, filling the kettle from the tap. He sat heavily in an armchair and wished that the ache that had accompanied him for the last eleven years would leave him be. Why was it he never felt content unless he was out on the road, trudging through mud a metre deep, the wind and sun turning his face into a very good imitation of an old boot; so leathery in fact that he looked a good ten years older than his fifty-three years of age. In a perverse sort of way he had actually grown to *enjoy* hardship, but the time had come to let all of that go. He sighed, allowing his body to sink into the padding, which seemed to mould itself around him. Several good nights of rest would put him right, he hoped, but in the short term at least eight hours of unbroken sleep in a warm bed would do. As he sat planning the future his eyes travelled around the room, this time taking in the smaller details he had missed on first inspection. Now he saw the photographs on the mantel. In one, taken many years ago at a time when his face was neither bearded nor scarred, he stood with his new wife before a church door, smiling smiles to shame the sun, heads full of no more ambition than to start making babies. In another his two young daughters, Rachel and Sandrine, mugged from the camera, and in another a boy he had never seen before embraced a much older Rachel. They were wearing military fatigues with red armbands — local defence force.

“I hope you still take sugar like you used to?” said Rachel as she bustled in from the kitchen with a mug of tea in her hand. “It’s hard getting hold of the stuff, what with the rationing and all. I’ve been keeping this for a special occasion, and I think today’s that day.”

The man, who had not had sugar in his tea, real or not, for the last eleven years, accepted the mug with a warm smile.

Drawing over a wooden chair the girl sat facing her father, unable to conceal her radiant delight.

“When did you get back?” she asked, fingers fiddling with the ends of her dressing gown cord, an old habit the man hadn’t seen for such a long time it immediately brought tears to his eyes. So many fond memories, all now tinged with such sadness. Life had been cruel before, but now...?

“Yesterday night,” he replied. “I slept at a barn on the edge of town, shared it with some cows and a horse. I don’t think they cared for me being there. The farmer’s wife gave me bread and cheese for breakfast, even though I didn’t have anything to pay her with. They were good people. As soon as I’m settled here, I’ll find them and repay them for their kindness.”

“They wouldn’t accept it,” said the girl, biting down on her bottom lip in a feeble attempt to curtail her smile. “Lots of things have changed around here since you left. I think you’ll be surprised.”

The man simply nodded, sipping his tea, wincing at its



intense sugariness. Times were so strange now, so extraordinary, but danger was never far away. Even here; *especially* here. “You know, you’ve grown up so much since I last saw you, but in some ways you’ve hardly changed at all.”

The girl looked down and blushed, her hands repeatedly tying and untying the robe’s cord.

“Eleven years.” He shook his head, feeling every year weigh upon him as if it was a decade. “You’re a beautiful young woman now and there’s so little I know about you. Are you married?”

She shook her head quickly, her pretty face darkening, and giggled.

“Well, I guess there’s still plenty of time for that,” he said gently, wishing he could take his daughter’s hand and pat it, but feeling that a barrier had fallen between them, a barrier created by passing of time: her sudden and wonderful maturation into a woman. How old was she now? Sixteen? Seventeen? “Where’s your sister?”

The girl’s smile died with a swiftness that alarmed the old man.

“You don’t know?”

He shook his head. “No, of course I don’t.”

“You didn’t get my letter?”

He took an old piece of paper from the backpack and

showed it to her. “It was a one-in-a-million chance, but I got it. I read it every night, to comfort myself that I was doing the right thing and not off on some stupid goose-chase, but there was nothing bad in it about Sandrine”

Rachel looked down at her knees. “You only got one of my letters?” she asked him, her voice barely louder than a whisper.

“That’s right,” said the man, “Just the one. They don’t deliver mail where I’ve been.”

“I sent you over a hundred letters, although I had no way of knowing if you’d actually received any of them. I handed them to people passing through town, hoping that they would find their way to you, wherever you were in the world. In the last letter I wrote... I wrote that... that Sandrine was dead.”

“Dead?”

After such abundant happiness the man’s sadness came not with a burst of intense grief, as he would have thought, but with gentle resignation. He closed his eyes, lips hovering over the steaming cup, and simply nodded his head. Death was not unusual, nor unexpected, in such a violent world as this, and he thought he had been fully prepared for any bad news he might hear after such a long absence — although in the event not quite prepared enough.

“How did it happen?”

The girl did not answer for some time, trying to find the right way to say the unsayable. It hurt to remember — *physically* hurt.

“There was a raid on the town from across the river and she went to help put out the fires — she was a volunteer in the fire service, you see. She was in the town hall trying to rescue a child when the roof collapsed. I don’t think she suffered much. I hope she didn’t suffer much. Can we speak of this another time? It’s still too raw.”

Yes, they would talk of such personal tragedies later, when he was ready to mourn. The man had seen so much death in the last eleven years that one more, even the death of one so close and dear to him, was too much for him to take. Now was the moment to celebrate those who lived, not pity the dead. The dead had all the time in the world, the living very little. Every moment had to be treasured, especially now.

“So, you’ve been living here alone?”

“Aunty Rosemary’s been keeping an eye on me, even though I’m quite capable of looking after myself.”

The man nodded to the photograph.

“And him?”

The girl blushed harder than before. “That’s Kenny.”

“Boyfriend?”

The girl nodded again, quickly, her cheeks so aflame they

could have been used to toast two slices of bread.

“Where is he now?”

“He’s doing a survey of the western fortifications with the local defence force and won’t be back until tomorrow evening. He’s nice, dad, you’ll like him.”

“You’re in this ‘defence force’ too?”

“Of course, everyone between the ages of fourteen and sixty is; it’s mandatory. We have to be prepared, just in case we’re attacked in the middle of the night. I’ve just got back from patrol and went to bed early because I was dog tired.” She frowned. “How did you know?”

He massaged his throat where her blade had given him a close shave by way of explanation. “I never taught you that. I’m proud of you.”

He thought his praise would brighten her, make her smile, instead he was alarmed to see her face darken and fall.

“Dad, why did you leave us?” she asked, fixing him with a challenging look. “Aunt Rosemary wouldn’t tell us anything. She just said you had something important to do and wouldn’t be back for some time... but we never knew it was going to be *years*. You don’t know how much I’ve missed you? Why did you go?”

Seeing his beloved daughter’s eyes fill with tears, the man could not stop himself from sweeping her into a tight embrace.

“And you don’t think I’ve missed you, too? At night I’d fall asleep whispering prayers to you and Sandrine, for your health, for your protection, wondering what you were doing and, often, I dreamed of you. But now I’m home and I want to know everything about you... but however much I’d like to I can’t tell you why I left.” He stared into her eyes.

“Promise me you won’t ask me that question again?” The girl prized herself from his embrace and the expression on her face broke his heart. “If I could tell you, I would, in a heart-beat, but the time has to right, and now is not that time.”

For a moment she was still, and then she forced her lips into a smile. “Of course I understand, father. I won’t ask you again, I promise.”

“Good,” he said, lovingly stroking her hair.

“You must be famished?”

“I could eat a horse, hooves and all. What was that I spied by the fire?”

“Lamb casserole. There’s not much left, but I can heat it up for you, no problem. Give me five minutes and it’ll be ready. Let me lay the table and we’ll have ourselves a lovely homecoming feast.”

“I’d love that.”

“Here, let me take your coat.”

He hesitated, and then smiled, undoing the coat buttons.

Taking off the coat (he marvelled at how much weight he had lost over the years) he handed it to the girl, and became aware that she was staring at the distressed leather folder he had secreted into a large pocket sewn to the side of his shirt.

“What’s that?” she asked, folding the heavy coat over one arm, trying to ignore its sweet, earthy fragrance.

“Just some homework of mine,” he replied, trying to make light of it. “It’s nothing important.” It was only a little white Lie. How little he would find out in time. “Don’t worry about me, I can sort myself out; I’ve been doing it for years.”

He watched his daughter bustle around the small kitchen, stirring the casserole, taking down two plates from the cupboard and collecting the cutlery from the drawer, making sure that everything was going to be perfect. In fact she went as far as to light two candles, and although she had eaten only a few hours earlier, she was eager to share this meal with her father, their first together in eleven years. A few minutes later she sat across the table from him, rather perturbed that he was regarding the steaming bowl of stew in front of him as if it might be poison.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, digging a spoon into the stew and blowing on its surface to cool it a little. “It’s good. Eat.”

“It’s not that.” His fingers touched his bandana in explanation. “I’m going to take this off now. I have to warn you that I have discovered that the search for truth has

consequences. I don't want you to be alarmed by what you see.”

A steely bolt of fear pierced her. “If you don't want...”

“No, I want to.”

She took a deep breath. “I'm ready.”

He took off the bandana, his eyes studying the girl for any reaction, noticing how she visibly flinched, her eyes searching the room for anything that would distract her from the uncomfortable truth. Then she focussed her eyes on the casserole before her and dug in with a will, unwilling to accept him for what he had become.

They ate in silence for a moment and it was only when the traveller reached for the loaf, cut himself a wedge and slathered it with butter, she spoke.

“What happened to mum *that* morning?” She asked, her voice timorous. “What *really* happened?”

“I've told you before, she killed herself.”

“When she saw...”

“You weren't there...” he said quickly, unwillingly to go over the old story again. “I don't want to talk about it.” He bit into the bread and chewed it vigorously, wishing he could postpone the next piece of news he had to tell her, but knew there was no time like the present. “Rachel, nobody can know I'm here, at least not until my work here is finished. You can tell nobody that I've come home, not even

Aunt Rosemary. It must be a secret.”

“Why?” she asked, spoon hovering below her lips.

“Because they wouldn’t understand what I’m trying to do. In fact they might even try to stop me.” They would definitely try to stop him. “I’m sorry, but that’s simply the way it has to be.”

“What about Kenny? Can I tell...?”

“No, you can’t tell him anything. And until I’m done he won’t be able to visit you here. Please don’t look at me like that. If I could have done things differently I would have, but... “ He opened his hands, all out of excuses,” ... there it is.”

Rachel eyed the stranger nervously. Was he really her father? If she had not known better she would have thought he was a completely different man to the loving father who had left home eleven years ago. In fact he scared her. Not just a little, a *lot*.

“How long will this work take?” she asked.

“Four or five months, I guess, but it could very well be longer. There’s really no way to be sure. Now, please, I don’t want to be rude, but I want to eat.”

\* \* \*



Contentedly full of casserole, the first home-cooked meal he'd enjoyed in years, the traveller entered his old study. He was glad to see that nothing had changed, just as he had requested. Everything was exactly where it should be. It was a little like re-entering the womb. On the old oak desk he had requisitioned from a derelict house he opened the folder and took out the tattered manuscript. Squaring up the odd assortment of pages as best he could he set them down before him on the blotter and gazed at them for a moment. He knew every page, every scrap, every leaf intimately, as if it contained his own personal history, and in a way it did. He had read and reread the pages countless times, annotated them, edited them by the application of a razor and a small drum of clear tape. He did not throw anything away he no longer needed; he ate the discarded fragments of paper to make sure they did not fall into enemy hands; but it did not matter because he could recite it all — every single chapter, paragraph, sentence, *word* — from memory; although maybe not in the correct order. Turning on the desk lamp he got down to work, knowing that this was the first night of what would turn out to be a long and arduous task, and he hoped he was up to it. How long would the work take? He'd told Rachel four or five months, but that had been a conservative estimate at best. The work could take him years. Maybe even decades. There was a good chance his labours would

kill him.

First the pages had to be collated (they were purposefully in a mess to confuse unwanted prying eyes), which could only be achieved by following the secret numbering system he had worked out during the first few months of his travels. Within two hours he had three piles sitting before him on the desk. The first pile was the largest by far, the second about half its size, while the third – the part he had most difficult obtaining — barely more than a few millimetres deep. For a second he considered how he should approach the project. He had mulled this point over in his head many times over the last few years, either sleeping in a cave, or beside a fire in a field, or even in the bed of a generous, warm-hearted woman, and had still not come to a firm decision on how to proceed, but now that the job was before him, he had to make a choice, and he did. Opening a drawer he took out his most treasured possessions, a Mont Blanc fountain pen his wife had given him to celebrate the publication of his first novel, and a bottle of indigo ink. As he unscrewed the bottle he was fearful that he would find the ink dried to a cake at the bottom of the squat bottle, but while the ink was a thick a few vigorous stir with the end of a broken pencil brought it back to life. With a pleasure that was almost sexual, he dipped the gold nib into the liquid and worked the little plunger several times until the pen was full. From another drawer he took a wad of perfectly white writing

paper, and having peeled off a few sheets, squared them up and placed them beside the manuscript on the blotter.

Everything was set.

“Now,” he said to the photograph of his wife. “Let’s do this, shall we Corry?”

She smiled back at him and he remembered that he had cracked a rude joke at the exact moment he had taken the photo. But that had been a lifetime ago, before all this had become necessary. Taking up the pen – how smoothly the heel of his right hand slid across the paper – he wrote “Chapter 1” at the top of the paper and stopped again.

“Where to begin? Ah, I know.”

Adjusting his glasses on his nose and bending his head to the white page, he got down to work.

He wrote...

# Chapter 1. The Account of Michael Wells, Part One.

The ninth of July no longer exists.

All that now remains on the calendar is a blank space.

It is a blank space filled with despair, terror, hope and, more than anything else, many long and painful memories. It is the blank space to end all blank spaces.

Indeed, people treat that inauspicious day in the same way they used to treat Friday the 13th, only this time they *believe*. Oh yes, they believe all right; after all the truth is right there before their eyes every morning, every night, every minute of the day until the day they die, or God wakes up, whichever comes first.

Personally I can remember everything that happened the night before as if it was only yesterday. It's not anything to boast about now, not really, as everybody remembers that night almost without exception, in the same way that people (from another age, another life) remember what they were doing when they heard that John F. Kennedy had been assassinated or Robert Armstrong had just walked on the moon, or even of that terrible car crash in the Pont de l'Alma tunnel. But while those things came and went, and any

effect they left on the world was, for the most part, nothing more than background noise, the after effects of July the 9th rings like a bell to this day. It rings loud and clear. It *resounds*.

So, back to that fateful July night I go, back to before everybody thought that tomorrow would be the ninth of July and that's all there would be to it.

It was a sultry Thursday night and all day there had been an oppressive feeling in the air, as if a power-on-high was firmly pushing down on the sky until it filled the streets of London with its compressed summer anger, like too much plaster squeezed into a crack to fill it. The pressure invaded every street, alley and attic, every tower, cellar and sewer; pushing and pushing until one expected walls to bulge and windows to crack. I once heard a man liken that day to living in a Coke bottle that had been shaken vigorously and then had its cap teased open. There was a feeling that something big was looming on the horizon, an explosion of sorts, but if we had known quite how big that "explosion" was going to be I bet most people wouldn't have been as subdued as they actually were.

Pigeons, the sole visible form of animal life on the streets of London, were quiet and lethargic. Mostly they sat brooding on branches or ledges, still and sightless, but a few stood on the baking pavement and didn't even attempt to fly away when people stepped over them. I believe a few

people even picked them up, or kicked them into the air like footballs, and the creatures barely turned their heads to defend themselves. Even the great river Thames seemed to have stopped flowing. Exhausted and spent by the terrible heat it had become a sluggish plug of mud that deadened the sounds of the great city it so neatly cut in two. There was a shimmer in the air, the sort of shimmer you get over the top of a radiator cranked up high on a cold winter morn.

I was sweating profusely. The clean handkerchief I'd stuffed into my pocket that morning was so wet I could have been dabbing my forehead with a slice of juicy melon. Looking back it was madness to go out that night, but humans, and especially humans of the British variety, have never been known to act sensibly when it comes to the hot summer months — just ask Noël Coward and the residents of Spanish holiday towns — and I was no different. I had booked two tickets to Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Ernest* at the New Embankment Theatre, which was getting rave reviews and nothing was going to stop me from going, not with them being close to fifty quid a pop! Still, the short underground journey from my apartment to Embankment came as close to me visiting Purgatory as I ever want to get in my lifetime. Even before we'd gone one stop all the passengers in my carriage looked like dying cattle stuffed into overcrowded trucks, their flushed, sweat-streaked heads bowed with fatigue. My shirt, fresh on that

hour, was already sticking to my body like a piece of damp tissue, and I could feel the sweat running down my chest in rivulets and streaming down the valley of my spine into my crotch, which felt like it had been transported to the tropics. I was so glad to get back out into the open that I almost whooped with relief, not that the open air offered much respite, for the difference couldn't have been more than a degree or two, and I'm sure the humidity actually intensified. Nicole was waiting for me at the agreed spot around the corner and she appeared to be taking the heat better than I was. She gave me a rather wan smile — as if anything bigger would have been too much effort — and we embraced briefly, for the heat our bodies radiated was almost unendurable to each other. Now, Nicole isn't one of nature's big sweaters, but I noticed that even her gorgeously oval face was covered with patina of dew, which I found rather attractive. Her blonde hair, normally lustrous, was uncharacteristically limp and hung around her bare shoulders in clumps; the bridge of her nose was red with sunburn.

“I think I'm dying,” she said, drawing the back of one hand across her forehead. “You look like you've already died.”

“Thanks,” I replied, pinching my shirt away from my body, trying to get some nonexistent air between the wet fabric and my skin. “How long have you been waiting?”

“Ten minutes, give or take.” She held up an empty coke can. “This is my second since I got here. Are you ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

Tossing the can into a bin she took my hand and led me across the Thames. All the cars we passed had their windows wound down, the drivers hanging out of them like panting dogs.

“Don’t worry, they’ll have air-con at the theatre.”

“You sure?” I said doubtfully. “Last place didn’t.”

“Of course it will. Who doesn’t have air-con these days? We aren’t living in the nineties anymore.”

But as it turned out Nicole was wrong. The air conditioning, unused to having to keep up with the demands of Satan’s sauna, had broken down shortly before the start of the performance. And so we took our seats in a theatre that felt like the inside of an oven left on 220 (fan assisted) and knew how a lobster must feel as he’s slowly lowered into the pot. By the time the red curtains swished open most of the seats were still empty, even though the blurb had proclaimed the show a sell out. I felt for the actors up on the stage — and under hot lights too — who could only haul themselves across the stage with the energy of salted slugs, projecting as best they could as they constantly fanned their dripping, waxy faces — even the men. Every now and then another member of the meagre audience stood up and lurched out, muttering apologies



under his or her breath as they shuffled up the aisle, and only twenty minutes had gone by when I glanced at Nicole and saw that she was looking at me and I knew exactly what she was thinking. We felt bad for the actors we left behind to carry on gamely (I'm sure I got a jealous glare from both of the Earnests' and Mrs Prism gave us the finger) but we could not simply endure another second in there. Actors should suffer for their art, but the audience, unless they enjoy Ibsen, shouldn't have to share their fate.

Outside the theatre night had fallen but the air was so hot and humid our aching lungs could hardly separate oxygen from moisture. Neither of us had the energy to eat so much as a bite — however taking liquids, especially *ice-cold* liquids, was a more agreeable prospect, and so along the Embankment we staggered in search of a pub, and discovered that we were not alone in our quest. The drinkers were straggled all along the riverside, the men stripped to their waists and many of the women too, plucking at the straps of their flimsy bras as if they were tempted to strip them off and throw them to the non-existent wind. Leaving Nicole leaning against a low river wall close to Southwark Bridge I fought my way valiantly into the pub, where I shall not recount my experiences. Some fifteen minutes later I battled my way back out with two glasses of cold Becks clutched in my hands. Nicole literally snatched the glass from me and downed a good quarter of it in one pull, a thing

I have never known her to do before. She was usually such a poised and elegant girl, sipping Champagne or sherry wine with genteel decorum, little pinkie extended. Sighing contentedly she wiped the froth from her lips with the back of her hand, and gave a little burp that was the epitome of cute.

“Oh my God, that’s *so* good,” she gasped, covering her mouth.

I took a good gulp of my own pint and had to agree. “You came straight here from work?”

She nodded. “I’ve been in the library all afternoon going through Halsbury’s Laws of England, which isn’t so much like hitting your head against wall as against the side of a mountain and have it hit back. You can’t imagine how long I’ve been dreaming of this .”

I watched her take another pull. Half a pint gone in less than a minute. Clearly one pint was not going to suffice on a night like this. Two weren’t going to do the trick, either. Three or four, I was thinking, at the very least.

For the last few months Nicole had been working at Compton Row Chambers on a training contract, assisting Ronald Edelstein QC with a rather tricky and decidedly high-profile case involving a well known actor, half a dozen baggies of cocaine and a gross-weight of condoms. The media were going crazy over the case, rooting around the court house and the scene of the crime like truffle-crazed

pigs in their desire to uncover even more sordid details to fill the summer-light pages of whatever rag they wrote for. Of course they had already found him as guilty as hell. Nicole had been filling me in on all the juicy details, and even though she had sworn me to secrecy I suspected she wasn't telling me everything, which was only to be expected considering the vows she had taken. Still, just like the media, I was hungry to know more.

“ — do you know he had more than three hundred condoms in a used candy bag in his suitcase. And they weren't just any condoms, they were specially imported from Japan, Okamoto or something. Apparently they're so thin you don't even know you've got them on.”

“Doubtful,” I said and then exclaimed, “*Three hundred!* What was he expecting to do with them all? Isn't he married?”

“One of the strongest marriages in Hollywood, or so they say.” She took another sip of her beer. “Although I guess it won't be once the trial is over.”

“How's he bearing up?”

“He's terrified, of course, but he's an actor so he hides it well. The funny thing is he doesn't like people looking him in the eye.”

“If I was as famous as him I don't think I'd dare leave the house,” I said. “But he must have known the risks from the start.”

Nicole shrugged. “I don’t suppose anyone truly knows how they’ll take fame until they’ve got it.”

“It’s the price they pay.”

“Maybe so, but remember they’re just people, like you and me. One day you might be judged, Mike, and then see how you like it.”

I shrugged off the matter. “So, has he propositioned you yet, what with all those condoms lying about? He’s just the sort, isn’t he?”

Laying her glass down on the concrete wall that divided us from the sluggish brown water some ten feet below, Nicole lifted her head and undid the plastic clip at the back of her head, allowing her strawberry blonde hair to stream down. If she was hoping to catch a cool breeze tonight she was out of luck, the air was scorched. She could have been standing behind the exhaust vent of a 747.

“My God, I can’t believe this heat!” she exclaimed, wiping her forehead once more. “What do you think it is?”

I was no expert in gauging temperature, but I made a guess. “Forty-five — fifty. But it’s not the heat, it’s the humidity that’s the killer. God knows what the humidity is. You couldn’t keep cigars out here, they’d go as soft as fudge.”

Nicole tried to fan her shiny face with a hand, not that it made any difference. The air was leaden; a dead weight.

“If it gets any hotter, I’ll probably faint. You’ll have to catch me.”

“Try not to move too much,” I said as she picked up her glass and lifted it to her lips. “See, you’re doing it right now.”

She drank anyway, and said, laughing, “That’s not a very helpful suggestion.” Then she looked up at the sky and frowned. “Looks like there’s a storm brewing.”

“More like an eruption,” I said. “That’s if this heat doesn’t break soon. And if it doesn’t, I think I just might. You might have to catch me first.”

“And drop my pint? You’ll be lucky.”

We were both looking up at the sky now. I’m not sure what we were expecting to see, maybe the signs of an approaching light show, or a horizon of boiling cloud, but there was nothing. Instead the heavens were dull and grey, a mirror image of the turgid Thames, the stars all but obliterated by the city’s army of streetlamps, but the bright scythe of a moon hung over the city like an evil omen. I didn’t like the look of it one bit, and despite the terrible heat of the night, I shivered.

“What’s the matter?”

Tearing my eyes from the moon, I smiled. “Nothing.”

“It’s not like you to say ‘nothing’,” she said, grinning. “If I remember rightly you have an opinion about everything.”

“It’s not that.” I shrugged uncomfortably. “It’s just that I’ve had this weird feeling all day.”

“Like you’re being watched?”

I must have looked startled, because Nicole giggled.

“You’re not the only one,” she continued. “The hairs at the back of my neck suddenly stand up, but when I look around to see if anyone’s there, lurking behind me, I’m alone. It’s very... creepy.”

“It’s been a strange day all round,” I said. “Must be the heat playing tricks on us; you know, like a mirage, but in the middle of the night.”

She nodded enthusiastically, her eyes shining. “Yes, exactly, like a mirage;” but having said this she turned away from me and looked into the distance. I could not make out what she was looking at, if indeed she was looking at anything at all. Nicole did weird things like from time to time and they never failed to spook me. Sometimes she could zone out completely for several minutes, and when she eventually came around she would have no memory of it. What was going on in that vibrant mind of hers, I have rarely been able to discover, but sadly this was not to be one of those times.

“Michael, I’ve been thinking.”

There was something about the way she said this that gave me a dreadful sense of foreboding. I made a non-committal sound at the back of my throat, prompting her to

go on.

“About next year...”

I stiffened. “What?” The short word sounded harsher than I intended it to.

Nicole glanced at me, and there was a touch of anxiety in her eyes. “I think we should put the date back.” Then she added quickly, “Not long... only by a few months.”

“Why?” I asked her, trying my best not to look shaken. “Nicole, we’ve been talking about this for the last six months. I thought we’d agreed on the date?”

“It’s... it’s still just a little too soon for me. I need more time.”

I had that old sinking feeling in my stomach. I’m sure if I looked down I would have seen my steaming entrails spilling out of my stomach and looping around my feet. “How much longer do you need?”

“Three months...” Then she said hurriedly; “No, six.. oh, I don’t know.”

Had she said “yes” last year simply because she could not bring herself to say the other word, and now that the reality of her situation had sunk in she was backing out the only way she knew how, one step and a time? What would she say in six months time — that she needed another six? A year? Two? Maybe even Longer than that? Why not call it off completely?

She must have sensed that she had wounded me as she quickly stepped towards me, placed one hand upon my arm while the other went around the back of my neck and pulled me close; so close I could smell the beer on her breath, yeasty and sweet.

“I love you, Michael. I love you and I want to marry you, but I need more time. I can’t explain why, it’s nothing I can put into words that you will probably understand. But believe me, I want to marry you and I *will* marry you.”

How can we know anyone, even those people closest to us — *especially* those closest to us? They can say things and do things and try to prove to you that they are exactly what they appear to be, and yet when you look in their eyes you can see a world you can never have access to — a world of emotion locked away inside their skull that you can never touch, never even guess at — and know that their thoughts will forever remain secret. Yes, I was hearing Nicole’s words — I could even see her beautiful lips shaping them — but I was failing to understand them. In that moment we could have standing on opposite sides of the North Atlantic Ocean and nothing could have brought us closer, but when Nicole kissed me tenderly on the lips and whispered sweet words into my ear I could not deny my love for her.

“All right,” I said, wincing as if I had swallowed a sharp fish bone; “We’ll put the date back, if that’s what you



want.”

She smiled at me, her big brown eyes probing mine. “Thank you, Michael. You don’t know how important this is to me.” Then she laughed abruptly. “It’s funny, I can’t stop thinking of ice.”

I knew what she meant. “There’s ice back at my place,” I said with a wink. “Quite a lot of ice actually. You’re welcome to share it with me.”

“Sounds like an invitation to me.”

There wasn’t a taxi to be found and descending into the pressure cooker that was the London Underground was unthinkable, so we decided to walk back to my apartment. We took our time as anything faster than a zombie-ish shuffle was quite impossible in the terrible heat of that Thursday night. All about us the city had a lank, torpid feeling, and the Tarmac stuck to the soles of our shoes as if it didn’t want us to get away. The air smelt like a cupboard that hadn’t been aired in years. As we trudged the melting streets I glanced up at the facades of the buildings and imagined that if I could peer an inch behind those dead-eyed windows I would find only a layer of hardboard; the doors painted on, the brickwork rolled on like wallpaper. We were walking in a city constructed entirely out of theatrical props and if Mrs Prism had suddenly lunged at us from out of the dark and threatened us with a knife I wouldn’t have been at all surprised. I could quite well imagine that we were the only

two people to have survived the apocalypse, and that suited me just fine.

The time was fast approaching 1 a.m. by the time we bashed our way through the front door and Nicole collapsed onto the sofa with a tortured groan while I retrieved a two-litre bottle of Evian from the fridge – I held the cold bottle against my forehead for a moment — so good — and then poured the water into two tall glasses filled with as many ice-cubes as would fit. For a few seconds we made no other sound than the gurgling of water in our throats as we drank thirstily. I could feel the iciness going down my gullet, and, oh my God, it was delicious. Leaving Nicole to finish a second glass I padded into the bathroom, usually made cool by the tile, but even now still uncomfortably warm, and turned on the shower. I had to peel my damp clothes from my body and kicked them into a corner so that their musty smell wouldn't reach me. Under lukewarm water I stepped, rising my face so that the starfish of trickling water from the showerhead hit me full on. For the first time in hours I began to feel clean. I wasn't surprised when I heard the shower curtain being drawn aside, the rattle of steel hoops on an aluminium railing, and felt slight but strong arms wrap themselves around my torso. We showered in silence, gently washing each other's bodies, and when we kissed the water flooded our mouths with its welcome freshness. Nicole took me by my hand, drew me from the shower and led me

into the bedroom. There was no need to dry ourselves as the water evaporated off our skin within minutes. We had no energy for sex — that would have been too much like hard work — instead I collected the promised ice from the freezer and took it into the bedroom where Nicole was stretched out on the bed like a cat luxuriating itself in front of a roaring fire. Her body, so smooth and sinuous in its femininity, was already glistening with a fresh film of sweat. When I sat beside her she turned her head towards me but did not open her eyes. Mouth slightly open, she sighed; a sensual, sexual, almost imperceptible sound that did bad things to me. Taking a lump of ice from the bucket I gently traced silvery lines of coolness down her body. She shifted slightly at its touch and shivered — a shiver of sheer pleasure.

Later we slept, or should I say Nicole slept, for I remained awake for quite some time. I couldn't understand how she could sleep when, even with all the windows thrown wide open and two oscillating fans set to maximum, the room was as hot as Mount Etna. We lay there, side by side, with nothing between our naked bodies and the vibrating air. I watching Nicole's breasts rise and gently fall; I watched a little TV with the sound turned down to a whisper; I watched a fly buzzing above my head, a black speck almost imperceptible against the darkness, and still sleep refused to come. Surprisingly, there was no storm, but the terrible heat did not let up for a moment. I felt like I was being smothered

by an invisible pillow.

I guess I must have finally drifted off sometime around four o'clock. I dreamt that I was falling through an endless pattern of crisscrossing lines; a grid projected against an infinite field of nothing. It wasn't so much scary as disturbing, as if I was losing myself inside a pattern that was so large and so complex that I had no hope in hell of understanding even the smallest part of it. It was a bit like being lost in a gigantic game of cat's cradle.

A sound woke me — was it a shout or was it a gasp? I glanced at the blurred red numbers of the clock radio close to my head, but my sleep-befuddled mind could make no sense of them. For all I knew they could have been written in ancient Martian. Exhausted, I closed my eyes, turned over to face the wall and allowed sleep to come down over me like black drapes. As far as I can recall I did not dream again until the morning sun finally awoke me, but if I did I'm sure it was of falling.

## **Chapter 2. The Account of Michael Wells, Part Two.**

I awoke to find Nicole gone and felt an instant pang of loss.

It was unlike her to leave like that. We usually enjoyed a little pre-breakfast coitus before the traditional eggs, bacon and pot of strong black coffee down at the little café around the corner on Bruton Street, then set off in our own separate ways, pushed and pulled by the vagaries of our businesses and the petty whims of family and friends, just like everyone else in the world. In the darkness of my bedroom I reached out a hand and felt the little indention in the mattress where she had lain, smoothing down the wrinkles. The sheets were cold. She had been gone for some time.

Naked, I climbed off the bed to take a leak, and was immediately struck by how much cooler it was. In fact it was quite chilly — chilly enough to make my skin break out into gooseflesh. Throwing on a towelling robe I padded down the hall to the toilet. I pissed while roughly scratching my scalp — I felt particularly greasy today — and swore when I sprayed across white porcelain. A wad of toilet paper quickly cleared up the mess. I flushed. In the kitchen I ground Columbian coffee beans down in an old Krupps grinder and let it steep in a glass cafatière while waiting for

two slices of granary bread to pop up from the toaster. I lavished them both with more salted butter than was good for me and munched them in the process of checking my Blackberry for messages, hoping to see a text or email from Nicole explaining that she had been wrong about wanting to postpone our marriage... *Damn*, no signal. I glanced at the clock. Not even six. Too early for the newspaper. The light flickered once and went off.

I was just reaching for the light switch when the sound of a scream from outside stopped me. What the hell? Walking to the open window I looked outside but could see nobody. But while the street might have been deserted, silent it certainly was not. In the apartment building opposite mine I could hear people rowing, accompanied by the frantic barking of dogs, and somewhere close by a child was crying. An alarm was sounding in the distance — no, not one alarm; *many*. Shrugging my shoulders I closed the double-glazed window, blocking out the worst of the sounds, and as I did so the light came back on again, as did the cooker and the fridge-freezer. As puzzled as I was I decided to check my desk diary to see what pleasures the day had in store for me. Yes, there was a meeting with Terry from accounts at 11 am which would turn out to be as dull as a Wagnerian opera, and at 1 a.m. I had a lunch appointment booked with Ray, who always drank more than was healthy for his already compromised liver and expected me to match him pint for

pint. After that there wasn't much to do except to put some time in at the office, unless I bit the bullet and called Nicole... or she called me. Now that I had slept on it I wanted to talk to her some more about her bombshell. Maybe I could argue — no, that would be the wrong way of going about it — maybe I could *convince* her to change her mind; persuade her to keep to the original date. I'd plead with her on my knees if I had to. Yes, that's exactly what I would do. I had already told my family and friends (in confidence of course) that we were going to get married — not that “in confidence” means much to family and friends. By now just about everyone must know; even my aunt Jane who I hadn't heard from since '05.

Back in the living room I turned on the TV, but got only salt-'n-pepper static. It's such an odd occurrence to get static on a TV these days that I was instantly concerned, and my concern only grew as I pressed the buttons on the remote, climbing up and down the ladder of channels, only to get either more static or a message saying that the station was experiencing technical problems and that normal programming would resume as soon as possible. When at last I finally came to a channel running a programme — something with puppets spelling out the word “co-operation” — my heart leapt, only for it to sink again when I realised that it was playing on a loop. Feeling oddly light-headed I rushed into my study and flicked on the TV there

— same results. Next up was the radio: static once more, except for some pre-recorded promotional material and adverts.

“What’s the fuck is going on here?” I said out loud, standing in the middle of my study, hugging myself like a three years old at the fun fair who’d just turned around to find his parents gone. I picked up the phone. Dead. By now the blood was pumping in my head so hard my temples felt like they were physically pulsing in and out. Frantically I tried to think of other forms of communication that I had forgotten. The internet! With shaking fingers I fumbled open the laptop and growled impatiently as it booted up with diabolical slowness, hoping that the old rule that computers only ever worked when you didn’t need them, and *never* when you did, would turn out to be wrong.

*“Come on, you bastard! Hurry up!”*

At last the screen came alive and I stared hard at the little icon at the bottom which would tell me if there was a signal. *Shit!* No telephone — no broadband connection — no email! In frustration I punched the screen with a fist and stood so fast the office chair tipped over behind me, its little black wheels rolling in the air.

And then, just to make matters worse, the electricity went off again. The only light to be seen came from the laptop’s screen, which was running off its battery, an icy radiance.

Finding yourself suddenly cut-off from the outside world



with no form of communication other than opening the window, sticking your head out and shouting, isn't just scary, it's *terrifying*. Maybe if I was living in a small cottage on Dartmoor, or on a small island off the coast, it wouldn't have been so bad, but here in the big smoke, crammed together with a five million or so other people, it was all but impossible to comprehend. Had there been some kind of terrorist atrocity while I slept? A bomb? One of those nasty dirty bombs they were always talking about in the papers? How they enjoyed detailing in explicit and lurid language what devastation such a device would wreck on a city the size of London. Or maybe there had been a crash? After all helicopters and jets were flying over the capital all the time. But surely that wouldn't have caused a complete media blackout, would it? These and many more equally implausible explanations passed through my head in a matter of seconds, but with no solid evidence to prove that any one of them was even within spitting distance of the truth, I was as much in the dark as before.

There was only one way I could find out what was going on, and that was by taking a look outside. A sudden deep and irrational fear gripped me. All the horror movies I'd ever seen rushed back to me like unwelcome relatives come visiting for a long weekend. Suddenly their lurid scenarios didn't seem so implausible after all: cannibal madmen feeding on the bodies of the dead; alien invaders stealing

our womenfolk; albino vampires haunting the subways and sewers in search of human prey.

In the quiet of my living room I abruptly laughed at these absurd fantasies.

“There’s must be a perfectly good reason for all of this,” I said out loud. I don’t usually talk to myself, but when it comes to reassurance and there’s nobody around, then your own voice is better than none at all. “There’s been a power failure or something and it’s just taking them a little longer than usual to get it sorted out.”

I knew this to be unlikely, but when you’re scared one fantasy is very much as good as another. “Give it five and everything will suddenly turn on and make you jump.”

I waited five minutes. I waited ten. Nothing happened. Half an hour passed and it felt like a whole day.

“Okay,” I said as I took a deep inhalation. “Let’s do it!”

But I still had some pride. In the bathroom I splashed my face with lukewarm water then ran my hands under the tap, ready to slick back my hair, and looked at my reflection in the mirror.

My world stopped.

No, it didn’t just stop, it physically shifted sideways.

You know how sometimes a friend or relative can interrupt you in an unfamiliar place, a place where you wouldn’t expect them to be, like, say, in a betting shop in Hounslow,

or a lap dancing club in Shoreditch, and just for a second you don't recognise them. You stare at their face and somehow the separate parts of your brain that link face recognition and name doesn't quite connect. Well, the face looking back at me in the mirror was not mine. In fact for a moment I could not quite understand exactly *what* I was looking at. My mind froze. Cautiously, *fearfully*, I prodded my cheek with a finger and felt my flesh depress.

Yes, that *really* was me in the mirror. That was *my face*.

You may well ask how I had managed to go long without looking at my reflection once in a mirror? Well, for a start I am a typical bloke, not one of those that guys who slaps on moisturiser both morning and night, plucks his eyebrows and shaves his legs, but the sort of guy who only has only one mirror in the bathroom for shaving, and maybe, if he's lucky, a second full-length mirror in the bedroom to check how much gut is hanging over his belt and make sure his trousers aren't riding too high. The other thing is that during the course of the morning I *had* passed mirrors many times, and had actually glimpsed my reflection more than once — markings and all — but had carried on as if there had been nothing strange about my appearance.

I had both seen the markings and *not* seen them at the same time, as if they had been there all along and I'd grown so used to them that I no longer saw them, like focussing all my attention on a mole that I had long forgotten about.

Shuddering with the bodily fear of the unknown — the sort of fear you feel when you look in the mirror and see a bloody red eye, a fat lip or a whitehead on the end of your nose staring back at you — I traced the strange markings on my face with the edge of a fingernail. I could only guess that Nicole had done them to me while I slept, drawn them onto my skin with red lipstick. But why? The words were blood-red in colour, and one moment they looked almost Arabic; at another more Germanic, or Sanskrit; Thai, Greek, Chinese. I quickly realised that the script seemed to contain traces of all written languages, or at least all the written languages I had a passing acquaintance with, and yet at the same time, none. It made no sense; why would Nicole want to write gobbledegook on my face? What was she trying to tell me? Did she even *know* Sanskrit? Somehow I doubted it.

Running the hot tap (thankfully there was still hot water in the pipes) I scrubbed my face hard and then looked at my reflection again, turning my face to catch the light from the small window. No difference. Maybe it wasn't lipstick after all, maybe it was permanent ink or marker pen. Grabbing the soap I created a thick lather and savagely washed my face, not caring if the soap got in my eyes or if I dripped thick foamy gobbets of it onto the bathroom floor. I literally put my whole head under the running water and then stared at my reflection in the mirror, knowing that I must have worn the markings down a bit; thinned them out a little — but no,

they had not been affected in the slightest. My obsessive washing had not dulled them in their lividness one little bit.

Drastic action had to be taken. Opening the drawer I took out an old fingernail brush I hadn't used in years and having lathered it up, scrubbed hard at a small spot on my right cheek, which was thick with the markings. I scrubbed until I couldn't bear the pain any longer, and then rinsed, slopping water over my legs and the bathroom floor as I did so. In the mirror I saw that my cheek was bright red, crisscrossed with many thin scratches, but the markings were as large and as distinct as when I had first seen them.

In a state of despair I walked in tight circles around my apartment, leaving a trail of water behind me. I didn't know what to do — I didn't know if there was anything I *could* do. There was no way I was going out looking the way I did. I tried the phone again and then slammed it down so hard it was a wonder I didn't smash the bloody thing to pieces. The mobile phone proved equally useless and I double checking the TV and radio with trembling fingers, only to be met with the same negative results. How can I describe my confusion and fear to you? Try to remember how you felt when you saw the markings on your own face for the first time? Think of your own confusion and fear... think of your utter desperation and sense of total alienation.

Thrice more I scrubbed my face in the sink and still the marks remained. This was no ink on my skin — not even

indelible ink could take such a pounding without showing at least some signs of fading or flaking, nor could paint. Only tattoos or branding could resist such repeated washing, but those methods were painful and would have left my skin broken and inflamed, which (apart from my recent scrubbing) it was not. And why would Nicole want to tattoo me anyway? There had to be a better explanation; one that might actually make some sense. Try as I might, I could not think what it might be.

Sitting close to the mirror I examined my face in detail for the first time. The marks – the strange words — were concentrated mainly on the right side of my face, clustered underneath my right eye and extending up and around my cheek to my ear, some overlapping so that a larger mark obliterated the smaller one. Another group, more evenly spaced than the first, sprawled across the bridge of my nose and ran down my left cheek until it met my jaw line. On my forehead the words arched over to the left where they disappeared under my hairline, as if running for cover, while a few words, so small they could hardly be read, formed a long oval stain that trailed onto my neck like a red slug.

And then it struck me: I could *actually* read these strange words.

How this was possible I did not know, for as I've said before these words were not written in English, but in a language alien to me, yet as my eyes followed this strange

script their meanings unfurled in my brain like lotus flowers — and what they said chilled me to the bone.

There, across my left cheek: Greed.

I caressed the word with a fingertip. I could feel no obvious difference between my skin and the letters. There was no raised bump or change in texture.

*Greed.*

And I knew it to be true. I am greedy. I'm not proud of the fact but then I've never really looked on it as a great failing, either. Everybody's greedy if they're honest about it — greedy for food; sex or money, or salvation and forgiveness, if they're that way inclined. But still, there it was, announcing my failing for the whole world to see. No hiding it now.

And it was not alone.

Not by a long shot.

There were more.

My hand moved up to my brow and found ADULTERY. How the hell could I have committed adultery when I wasn't even married? And then I remembered the vows Nicole and I had made one cold day in Oxford last October. At the time we had meant them with all our hearts. Did that mean we were already as good as married? In the intervening months I had cheated on Nicole twice; once with a girl from work named Zoe; a rather half-hearted fling that I regretted almost

immediately. The second time was with a rather plasticky prostitute in Budapest during a friend's stag weekend. I was drunk and didn't know what I was doing... or at least that's the story I tell myself to stop myself from feeling guilty. Maybe I had tried to hide my sin from myself by piling layer after layer of feeble excuses on top of it; but my body certainly hadn't forgotten, and, sure enough, when I looked further I found LIAR running vertically up my neck. That brought me neatly to my next sin.

“Fury?”

It was a single word on my right cheek, just underneath my eye, so thick and vivid in its veracity that it almost formed a solid block of colour. Yes, I have a problem with anger — with Fury — and have had since I was a child. I could tell you stories about my tantrums — my “earth-shakers” as my late father liked to call them — that would curl your hair and turned my mother prematurely grey — or at least that's what she claimed.

There were other sins, smaller sins — some so minor I could hardly make them out at all. But by concentrating on the marks on my face I had completely forgotten about my body. Were there more markings down there, markings that I had not yet seen? I knew there were none on my hands and feet, that I could tell from a single glance, but what of the skin below my robe? Opening the cupboard door to reveal the full-length mirror fixed to the inside, I untied the cord and



let the robe fall to the floor... and got the biggest shock so far in a morning full of shocks. There, over my heart, in letters of the deepest red, a single word cried out its horrible accusation:

MURDER.

Thank you for reading these three sample chapters of Red Written. I hope you enjoyed them? If you would like to read the complete novel it can be downloaded from Amazon, or you can find the link on my website.

If you're interested in my other novels you can find information on them on my website, along with free sample chapters and blog.

[www.ptmayes.com](http://www.ptmayes.com)

You can also follow me on Facebook and Twitter.