

Red in Wonderland

A Red McKenna Novel

by

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Read the first chapter of the first installment of the Red
McKenna Series.

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“AAAAAUUUUGGGH!” she screamed, beating her fists on top of the car’s fender, but not too hard. As frustrated as she felt, this was still her beloved pink 1965 Shelby Mustang convertible she was beating on.

Not only did she not want to take a chance on denting the fender, but she didn’t want to take a chance on breaking a wrist, either. One hard crack with her even-more-beloved wrist on that little signature knife-shaped ridge the Ford designers had molded into the fender’s outside edge, and she wouldn’t be playing tennis for a long, long time.

Yet, this had been a bad day, on top of a bad week, capping off what seemed an impossibly bad life since her father disappeared ten years ago. Having her pony-car’s engine burst into clouds of white smoke to the staccato accompaniment of loud rapping noises had just been the cherry on top of that evil cake.

“Life shouldn’t be this hard,” she thought.

All she really wanted was what every woman wanted, at least what she knew her mother had always wanted: a home, a family, kids to bring up, and a husband she loved and respected to grow old with. Was that too much to ask?

What was wrong with her? She was smart. She had the grades in a top university to prove that, at least. People said she was pretty.

She *was* awfully tall – taller than any woman she’d ever met, including her mother, who wasn’t exactly short – but there were plenty of guys taller than her, and a lot who didn’t seem to mind tall girls. She was athletic, but what was wrong with that?

She liked guys. She liked guys a lot!

Especially, she liked the big, competent ones who, like her father, always seemed to know what to do, and met every situation

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with humor because they knew everything would turn out alright. Ever since she could remember, she'd felt a little something in the pit of her stomach whenever she was around them.

Because she liked guys, she tried to make herself attractive to them, not like a lot of the girls she knew, who purposely tried to look plain in an effort to make people respect them for their minds.

"Judith," her mother had said, "if you were a really great guy, and you had to choose between a smart, homely girl, or a smart, beautiful girl, who would you choose? You can be the smart, beautiful girl, so don't be stupid!"

So, why couldn't she find one of those great guys for herself? Her mother had. Why couldn't she? True, her father been taken away from her mother when he was needed the most, but at least she'd found him, and had him for a while.

* * *

Judith had been devoted to her father. When he was home, which wasn't often, they'd spent days together hiking the Appalachian Mountains near their home in Maryland. He was her guide to the wonders of the natural world, and science in general. He was her favorite playmate, most inspiring teacher, and her idol.

Even when he was away, she never felt separated from her father. She still explored the same hillsides. She read the same books. She dreamed the same dreams.

Whenever she discovered a new glade, or saw a brook she'd never seen before, she would think, "I can show this to Daddy when he gets back."

Judith couldn't believe he'd abandoned them. Why'd he disappear? There was nothing in her memory that could explain it. She just *had* to find him to find out why. Maybe then she could figure out what was wrong with her.

James McKenna had always been a maverick. As a geologist, he was known for leading his employers to fabulously rich deposits of oil, gas, and minerals.

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He was also known for ideas that more conventional geologists found just a little crack-brained. The fact that he was right more often than not just made the arguments more heated. His fine Irish temper didn't exactly smooth things over, either.

Consequently, when he wasn't off pointing drilling rigs at sand dunes in Saudi Arabia, or mapping Tarzan's escarpment in sub-Saharan Africa, he was wandering the hills alone trying to prove that some odd rock pinnacle stood sentinel over amazing mineral wealth, despite what his rivals said.

As time went on, these expeditions grew more frequent, and stretched from weeks-long into months, and even years. Finally, when trying to find an undiscovered mother lode in Nevada, he simply never came back.

* * *

Things then became more difficult for Judith and her mother. After her father's disappearance, money was harder to come by. There was no insurance because he wasn't legally dead, just not around.

When their savings began to run out, her mother worked menial jobs full time during the day, and took classes at night to build a career. That left Judith on her own more than ever.

The little girl doing chores, playing outdoors, and reading books grew into a young woman running a household, excelling in sports, and earning top grades.

Growing into a six-foot-three-inch redhead with a crack athlete's body, an aptitude for mathematics, and an independent streak a mile wide, she didn't have much luck with boys. Those who weren't intimidated by her size, strength, and no-nonsense attitude were scared off by her mind.

Of course, she compensated by spending more time with sports and books, which just made everything worse.

Then, in her second year of college (full scholarship at an Ivy League school, of course), her mother suddenly had her beloved

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father declared legally dead so she could marry some oil tycoon. Judith never understood that. She blamed her mother for weakness, and her step father for trying to replace her father.

Here it was, Spring Break of her senior year, and she'd come to spend another dreary week on her evil stepfather's yacht at his Miami Beach yacht club while he pretended to be nice to her. When she found he was trying to fix her up with some pencil neck he knew from work, she'd had enough. She just got into her car, and drove off.

That cloud of white smoke was the final betrayal. After getting out, stomping, screaming, and pounding her anger out on the car's fender, she dropped back into the driver's seat to have a good cry.

* * *

That's how he found her, sitting with her long, freckled legs sticking out of white shorts through the open car door, sneakered feet in the dust by the side of the road, head buried in folded arms cradled on her knees, with long flame-colored hair cascading over everything, and sobs wracking her shoulders.

"Looks like you've had a tough day," was all he said.

Startled, she looked up to see a tall figure standing over her with a motorcycle helmet dangling from one hand. He'd ridden up on what seemed to be the biggest, yellowest motorcycle she'd ever seen, gotten off, and walked over while she'd been busy bawling her eyes out.

Instantly, she felt that old, involuntary jolt of excitement in the pit of her stomach.

Yet, he was nothing like the picture she had in mind for her ideal mate. Sure, he looked like something out of an old Errol Flynn movie, but she knew that was just fantasy.

Real guys with whom she could build a home and a family, and who'd stay around long enough to grow old with, didn't look like something out of a pirate movie. The ones that did just weren't husband material.

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Starting from worn, stained black boots laced up to his knees into which were tucked equally grime-covered black leather pants whose tightness exposed tree-trunk-like thighs, her gaze rose to a black tee shirt, which enhanced rather than hid his weight-lifter's upper torso and muscular arms. Finally, she came to a tanned weather-beaten face with shaggy dark-brown hair, and beard.

Definitely out of a pirate movie. She suppressed her physical attraction by thinking to herself: "another macho would-be tough guy."

Yet, there were those eyes that seemed to peer right inside her as if reading her thoughts, but in a kindly way. Not what she'd expect from the testosterone-addled egomaniac biker image she was force fitting him into.

* * *

Confused, Red simply gave in to her very real need for immediate help.

"Yeah," she said, simply.

"My engine broke down," she continued, as if the still billowing cloud of white smoke wasn't a dead giveaway.

"I don't know what to do," she added with equal transparency.

Thinking she must look like an idiot, frustration and embarrassment once again overflowed through her tear ducts. She turned her face away so he wouldn't see.

What he really thought, when he saw her lifted face, was that she was the most gorgeous woman he'd ever seen, despite the tears streaming over freckled cheeks, and the puffy red-rimmed eyes.

"This one has good bones," he thought, and, while her expression was a mixture of frustration, anger, confusion, and even a little fear, she displayed not a hint of panic.

She wasn't giving up, she was looking for a way out. It showed an unusually tough character for a woman who looked as good as she did. Usually, beautiful women didn't have to work that hard.

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“You’re not the first one to blow an engine,” he laughed. “Everyone who’s ever given love to a classic car ends up by the side of the road more than once. Pop the hood, and let’s see the damage.”

Somehow, his comment made her feel instantly better. Instead of a moron who couldn’t do anything right, she suddenly felt like an adventurer faced with a sudden challenge. Maybe she’d be okay, after all.

* * *

While she pulled the handle that unlatched the hood, he put on the driving gloves he’d stuffed into his helmet with his sunglasses when he gotten off his bike. It took him a while to feel around in the narrow space between the hood and grill to find the safety catch.

She noticed he didn’t seem embarrassed by the difficulty. He just made funny faces as he felt around for the lever, then tried pushing it in different directions, each time changing to a different wry expression, until a bright smile appeared as the catch finally released.

His little performance actually made it seem like they were having fun!

He involuntarily backed his face away from the white cloud released as he raised the car’s hood. It was hot, wet steam that smelled of anti-freeze, and felt like it was melting his eyeballs.

He put his sunglasses back on to protect his eyes, and tried to peer through the cloud to find the source of the loud hissing still emanating from the engine compartment.

“Hopefully, you’ve just blown a radiator hose. When was the last time you had this thing serviced?”

“I dunno. I don’t drive it very much. I go to school up in Cambridge, and just drove it down here on vacation.”

“Hmmm. Next time, change all the fluids, check all the seals,

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and do a tune up before taking it on a long trip. Cuts down on the roadside adventures.

“The first thing that goes when you let a car sit a lot, then take it on a long trip is the hoses. ... Nope, I don’t see a problem with the hoses.”

He pulled the sunglasses off again to peer more deeply into the shadowed engine bay. Ducking his head under the steam cloud, he stuck his face close to the engine.

* * *

“That’s what it is!” he exclaimed.

“You’ve blown both head gaskets. They’ve probably been leaking a little bit for a long time. Water was being sucked into the cylinders on the down stroke, and blown out through the exhaust. You didn’t see anything because it came out as invisible superheated steam. When you ran too low on water, the engine overheated, and pffsht!”

He delivered this report in an almost clinical tone. No emotion, it was just data. He could have been giving a weather report, or explaining the migratory patterns of monarch butterflies.

He didn’t blame her for hurting her car. He didn’t commiserate over her trouble. He made an engineering assessment.

“Is that bad?” she asked, not knowing from his tone what it could mean.

“Well, it’s a whole lot better than, say, having melted a piston, which I’ve done more than once.”

“He says that as if it’s just nothing!” she thought.

Again, what he said, and the way he said it, made her feel better about having screwed up.

“But, it’s a whole lot worse than splitting a hose,” he said, “which I’d hoped for. You’re going to be stuck for about a week.”

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It took a few seconds for that to register.

She had no place to go. She couldn't go back to Miami. She wouldn't!

She started to feel the first signs of panic crawling up from her belly. Her eyes started to fill up again. Fighting, she pushed down the panic, and flicked away the tears.

“What do I do?” she asked, thinking aloud.

* * *

Thinking she was asking him for advice, he said, “Luckily, there’s a mechanic about a mile ahead who owes me a favor. He’s a good guy, and won’t screw you over. He can tow it in, then we’ll find out for sure what the situation is.”

“Uh, I don’t know,” she replied, suddenly wary. “Maybe someplace else?”

“You gotta choice? It’s that, or start leafing through the phone book, and you’ve got no phone book. I understand that all you have to go on is a recommendation from me, and you don’t know me.”

“But, you’ve never steered me wrong, either,” she laughed, realizing she was looking a gift horse in the mouth.

“Okay, we’ll do it your way. I really do appreciate your stopping to help. Nobody else seemed to care.”

“Well, I couldn’t leave you to the tender mercies of some half-drunk college sophomore looking for a Spring Break thrill, now could I?”

“Lock up everything you can’t carry, leave the hood up, and I’ll ride you over to Bill’s. He can come back to get the car while you get in out of the sun. I hope you’re wearing sun block. You look like you’ve had enough, already.”

“Yes, I am. I’ve spent enough time outdoors to know that much. As you can see from the freckles,” she said, suddenly shy

about her spotted complexion.

Figuring it was simplest, she grabbed her shoulder bag, put up the convertible top, and locked the doors.

By that time, he had the motorcycle up off its kickstand, and running. As she walked over, slinging the shoulder bag strap over her neck to leave her hands free, he started to explain about first putting her weight on the left-hand floorboard to reach her right foot over the seat.

* * *

Instead of listening, she stood with her left foot flat on the ground next to the bike, and simply raised her right foot over the seat, planted it flat on the ground on the other side, then sat down on the elevated passenger's seat.

“Damn! Those legs reach all the way to the ground!” he said, impressed.

“This is like an easy chair,” she commented as she lifted her feet to the floorboards and the bike took off.

“I designed this bike specifically for long distance touring,” he shouted as the bike picked up speed. “Ten hours a day, seven days a week can get pretty rough, so I wanted all the comfort I could get.”

“It’s quiet. Just a low rumble.”

“The loud rapping most choppers make, and the angry buzz of a lot of sport bikes, can tire you out fast on a long trip.”

“Wait, you said you *designed* it?”

“I like to design all my bikes. For a touring bike, I usually start with a stock frame and engine because the factory does a lot of testing to make their touring bikes reliable. I could never get that reliability in a one-off design. Then, I put everything else together the way I want it.”

Putting two, and two together, she came to the conclusion he

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was an itinerant motorcycle mechanic, or a bike builder, like on TV.

“Where did you say you were from?” she asked.

“I live in Arizona. I come out here every year for Daytona Bike week.”

“What’s that?”

“Every year they have a week-long motorcycle racing event at Daytona Speedway. Racing fans come from all over the world to see it. Years ago, more people started coming in just for the parties and fun than for the races.

“Now, it’s one of the four biggest motorcycle rallies in the U.S. There’s one in Laconia, New Hampshire, one in Laughlin, Nevada, and the biggest one’s in Sturgis, South Dakota. Hundreds of thousands of people show up just as an excuse to get together.”

“Sounds like fun. How come I never heard of it?”

“Probably because you’re not a biker. My company sells equipment to a lot of the racing teams, so I come out every year. The races finished up today, and I’m taking my time riding back to Arizona.”

* * *

So much for her theory about his being a itinerant bike mechanic. He worked for a company. Maybe in sales? He didn’t look like a salesman, but who knows?

“What is it you do?” she asked.

“Ahhh, well. The company makes a lot of special equipment for different industries. Motorcycle racer stuff is just part of it.”

“What do *you* do?”

“Ummm. I do a lot of things. The company mainly develops stuff for the aerospace industry. Test equipment, and so forth.”

Why was he being so evasive? She asked about him, but he

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answered with vague tidbits about this fabulous company. He was probably just a low-level flunky trying to impress her with the stuff his company makes.

“Where were you going, by the way?” he asked.

“Oh, I was headed west,” she said, being evasive herself.

“Vacation?”

“Not exactly,” she said, trying to avoid explaining that she’d run away with no clear plan in mind.

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