

Silver Rivers

A Red McKenna Novel
by

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Read these first chapters of the next installment of the Red
Mckenna Series.

MOBILE OPTIMIZED EDITION

SAMPLE CHAPTERS



1

Greed had been their downfall. Greed and fascination with Western ideas. Hsiu Mei knew that now, but now it was too late. Everything was gone, and none of it could ever be recovered.

Growing up in a small town in rural China, she and her husband, Benny, had loved each other since before they knew what love was. That was very common in rural Chinese communities.

Another thing that was very common was that she barely knew how to read. The government, of course, tried to promote good education for everyone, but in rural Chinese villages, the government could not always enforce its wishes.

Benny was not the name her husband's parents had given him. His Chinese name did sound a little like "Benny," so when he got old enough that people asked *him* what his name was, he told them "Benny" to sound more Western. He'd heard it was a common name in America, and he was fascinated with America.

Hsiu Mei's name loosely meant "sophisticated eyes." She wanted people to think of her as a young lady wise in the ways of the world, and ready to meet the future on her own terms. Even as a little girl, she'd shared her future husband's fascination with all things Western, and especially American.

Benny was better educated than she was. He was a boy, and boys were traditionally better educated than girls. Benny could read well, and do arithmetic. He knew how to keep business accounts, and wanted to become an entrepreneur.

It was Benny who had taught her to be less traditional. He gave her magazines showing all the latest fashions and lifestyle products available from those who sold Western goods, and often read the articles to her. As time went on, she learned to read better by poring over those magazines, herself, and asking Benny what different characters meant.

By the end, she could read well at the level of those fashion magazines, and could read and understand numbers. She was never much good at arithmetic, though. She had Benny for that.

In the West, the magazines told her, they had beautiful fashions, magical technology, and freedom to enjoy those things.

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She had known of their existence even before reading the magazines, and believed that it was the rich bureaucrats in Beijing who kept poor Chinese people from having them.

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It was her parents who had taught her about the rich bureaucrats in Beijing keeping the Chinese people from advancing. They had realized this after Mao Tse Tung's so-called "Cultural Revolution" of the nineteen-sixties.

What was supposed to be a great leap forward had actually set people back generations. People had forgotten the wisdom of the past, substituting instead stupid slogans and plans that never worked out.

In the West, they had none of that. People did what they wanted, and what they wanted was to become rich. That's what everyone really wanted, anyway. At least, that was what Hsiu Mei had thought.

That, Hsiu Mei now realized, was where she and Benny had gone wrong. By following the Western pursuit of greed, they had destroyed their lives.

Now, everything was gone: their health was gone; their sanity was gone; even their beautiful baby boy was gone – stillborn as a punishment for their greed and pursuit of Western ideas.

When they'd married, just a few short years ago, everything had been wonderful. Their future was full of promise. He was handsome and intelligent. She was beautiful and sophisticated, just as her name implied.

She knew when she married Benny that his goal was to become rich any way he could, even if it meant bending or breaking the law. The laws, their parents had taught them, were made by powerful people in Beijing for their own benefit, not to help poor people wanting to become rich.

She felt that, together, she and Benny couldn't lose. They would be bold and aggressive. They would achieve their dreams through courage and resourcefulness, and by being very, very clever.

At first, they had been poor. Benny worked hard to find a business that would make them rich. He'd finally connected with

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some people who were selling antiquities to rich foreigners on the black market.

Those people had set him up with a legitimate antiques shop in the nearest big city, Xi'an, but his real business was to receive artifacts from black-market suppliers – no questions asked – and to pass them along to his partners in Beijing, who would dispose of them at an enormous profit.

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At first, Benny's suppliers were mostly peasants, like himself. He had grown up with many of them, in fact.

They knew the secret abandoned places where people used to live, but had gone away. They would scour those places for anything the people might have lost or left behind when they went away.

Those things belonged to nobody, the peasants felt, so they were fair game for anyone who could find them and knew where to sell them for the best price.

Benny's partners supplied him with cash money to make Benny's shop the best place for his suppliers to sell their found objects. They quickly learned that fact, and Benny's black market business grew rapidly, although his legitimate shop remained small.

It was better to remain small. Otherwise, government officials might take too much notice.

As time went on, Benny learned to tell genuine ancient artifacts from fake ones, and even learned to date them just by looking at them. Different styles were made at different times in the past, so it wasn't hard once you learned to recognize the differences. Benny's partners supplied him with catalogs and books he could use to date objects the like of which he'd never seen before.

Benny also learned to clean the artifacts, and get them ready to show to his partners' customers, who would buy them for many times what Benny paid to the peasants who "found" them. Hsiu Mei learned to help with cleaning the artifacts and storing them out of sight of nosy officials. That meant Benny didn't have to hire helpers, who might not be trusted to keep his secrets.

Hsiu Mei knew that Benny's business was illegal. The

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government officials wanted to keep these things for themselves and their friends, and made laws regulating whom they could deal with and whom they could not.

Benny's black-market suppliers were not on the list of legitimate suppliers, and Benny knew he could get better prices by selling to private collectors, who were not on the list, either, than by selling to government officials who were.

Essentially, he and his partners bought from whoever had good stuff to sell, and sold to the highest bidder. That was capitalism – the American way.

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As Benny got better at this trade, and made better contacts, people started bringing in better stuff. His suppliers gradually changed from poor peasants bringing in chance finds of mostly old junk, to professional treasure hunters who sought out the most valuable pieces that their former owners hadn't wanted to part with, even in death.

Sometimes they were the same suppliers as before, who had grown in sophistication, themselves. Sometimes they were outsiders who came in to exploit the rich pickings in and around Xi'an.

Xi'an was, after all, the first capital of a unified China. It's name was pronounced "Chin," and gave the Chinese Empire its name.

As time went on, both the value and frequency of Benny's deals grew, until he and Hsiu Mei were able to get a nice apartment in Xi'an, and start thinking about a family.

Around a year ago, Benny had come to her all excited. A new supplier had come in with some spectacular first-dynasty gold and jade pieces. Benny had immediately seen that they were priceless, and negotiated what he thought was a really good deal for himself.

The supplier wouldn't say anything about where he got the pieces. Benny wasn't surprised. In his shoes, Benny wouldn't have told, either, and neither would any of the other suppliers. If you told, the people you told would just go get the stuff for themselves, and cut you out of the deal.

His supplier's reticence did, however, tell Benny that the man

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thought there was more where that came from. The man confirmed that when he brought in an even bigger collection a few weeks later.

That was good news for Benny and Hsiu Mei. These pieces were extremely old, extremely rare, and extremely valuable. They felt they were now on their way to becoming *really* rich.

Benny would have thought the man was selling off material from a private collection, except that all the pieces were caked with reddish dirt. That meant they were fresh from the ground.

Benny and Hsiu Mei cleaned off the dirt in a little storeroom in the back of their apartment. There was room to do it in the back of the antiques shop, but it was safer to do it in their apartment building.

Government officials watched antiques shops like Benny's carefully for signs of illegal activity. It was better to keep these extremely rare and valuable pieces out of sight.

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The reddish dirt dried quickly, and fell to a fine powder that got all over the place. Hsiu Mei complained that it made keeping the apartment clean impossible, but there wasn't much they could do.

The red powder also irritated their throats, and they began coughing a lot. They talked about finding a small warehouse or storage space to clean and store the artifacts when the baby came, but that never happened.

As time went on, more artifacts kept coming. They were all from the same, very early period, so wherever the man was getting them, it was all from the same trove. Benny figured that the man had found a big grave site, and was systematically looting it.

That would make what he was doing highly illegal. If the government officials found out, not only would the supplier go to prison, but so would Benny, his partners, his customers, and even, perhaps, Hsiu Mei, who was now pregnant.

He talked with Hsiu Mei about it, pointing out the danger. She didn't care. She was seeing money coming in at a faster rate than ever before, and wanted it to continue.

That was how they were going to finally become rich! The danger just made the prices for everything go up. She figured that

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would help them get richer faster.

Weeks later, however, they started having marital problems. Hsiu Mei thought it might be the stress from knowing how much trouble they could get into.

They were also going through a lot of changes. They had a lot more money to spend, and argued about how to spend it. She would find herself weeping uncontrollably over even minor arguments, while Benny would laugh at her emotionalism.

The move to Xi'an had not improved matters. Benny was trying to impress his partners in an effort to move up in the business. Instead, they became concerned about his growing emotionalism, and strange reactions to events. For example, he might start laughing when a deal went bad, then fly into a fit of rage for no apparent reason.

Both he and Hsiu Mei had trouble sleeping, and Benny started having memory lapses, which his partners noticed as well.

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Benny complained that Hsiu Mei kept their apartment too hot. He was sweating all the time. He said it was affecting his skin. He began to have rashes, and even peeling skin.

He complained that she put on too much makeup, which made her look like a cheap tart. He said that it embarrassed him.

She countered that it looked better than the unnatural redness her cheeks and nose had started showing. And, her hair started falling out, so she began wearing elaborate wigs.

Neither one was getting enough sleep. They had to make at least one trip per week back to the village to pick up more pieces – often many pieces that would take a couple of days to clean and prepare before they could pass them on to Benny's partners. But, even when they got to bed, exhausted, they still had trouble sleeping.

Disaster truly struck when Hsiu Mei had her miscarriage. Her beautiful baby boy, whom they'd waited so long for, died in her belly!

She was heartbroken.

He was furious.

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Benny blamed her for losing her baby – killing his son! He became abusive. Finally, they had a screaming argument one night at dinner over nothing. Benny was just looking for an excuse to fight. They both were.

He grabbed the empty wine bottle and began beating her with it. He smashed her beautiful little potato chip of a nose to pulp, knocked out three of her teeth, and crushed the bones of her cheek. They found out later he'd also broken her jaw.

He hit her so hard that the bottle shattered, slicing great gashes in her face. That left scars that no amount of makeup could hide.

She would never be beautiful again.

She knew it was her greed that had caused this. Her greed and her wanton lusting after the material possessions she associated with a Western lifestyle.

She was sorry she'd ever started on this course. She was sorry she'd encouraged Benny to turn to crime to get what they wanted.

She knew her troubles were a punishment from Heaven for being greedy. She longed to tell Heaven she was sorry, but with no religion to guide her, she didn't know how.

She longed to say she would give it all up if only she could make it stop. If only she could turn back time, she'd never do it again. If only she could go back to their little village, and live a quiet life bringing up a quiet family as her mother had done.

But, she couldn't do that. It was too late.

There was nobody who could help, either. There was nobody who even cared to try.

* * *

One night, when Benny called to say he would be working late again – she knew he wasn't really working, but trying to forget his troubles in the arms of his new girlfriend – she sat at her makeup table trying to reverse the results of her mistakes.

She put on a blond wig to hide her patchy, thinning hair. She loaded on makeup to cover the red rashes on her cheeks and forehead.

But, none of that could hide the ruined lump of her now

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shapeless nose, or the streaks of the scars on her face, or her crushed cheek, or the crookedness where her jaw hadn't set right.

Worst of all, she was now having trouble focusing her eyes, and tremors shaking her hands made it impossible to put her makeup on right.

The result was a hideous mess that looked more like a mask than a face. No wonder Benny had a girlfriend!

Sobbing, she put on her best dress, and tottered out to the balcony of their twenty-third-floor apartment. Taking a long, tearful look at the glittering lights of Xi'an far below, she mourned for her baby, for herself, and for the life she had thought to have.

She'd achieved all she thought she wanted, but at a cost she couldn't bear.

She climbed over the railing and let herself fall.

2

Dr. Chen Ju Long was exhausted and depressed. He'd just spent fourteen hours on airplanes, and was right back when he started.

It was still mid-afternoon Monday. In fact, the plane, which was, unbelievably, exactly on time, landed five minutes earlier (by local time) than it departed! The only other difference was that it was now Monday afternoon in Phoenix, Arizona, USA, instead of in Beijing, China.

He'd been traveling for a long day that had vanished like the ghost of a cloud.

While he'd done an awful lot of sleeping on the flight, it was sleep that did him very little good, being broken up by a two-hour stop in San Francisco to change planes, as well as meal service, and snack service, and people moving about the cabin. He was still tired, and depressed, and a long, long way from home.

Ms. Thompson wasn't any help, either, and he wasn't sure why. She was stunningly beautiful by anyone's standards, with a full figure, long blond hair cascading over her shoulders and down her back, and a smile that could make a man cheerfully walk barefoot across broken glass to be near her.

She, however, made him feel the opposite of the powerful, gigantic dragon implied by his name. She, in fact, made him feel short and puny.

It wasn't entirely her fault. At 178 cm (five feet, ten inches), she towered over him. Even more intimidating, she was broad-shouldered and muscular.

That last part *was* entirely her doing, of course. She kept a professional athlete's exercise regimen.

It was a habit she said she'd picked up from her best friend in America, who had been an Olympic athlete. In the few weeks he'd known her, she'd spent more time pumping iron and beating up punching bags than he'd done in his entire life.

He'd seen her easily pick up things that weighed more than he did.

Then, she was frustratingly smart. She always seemed to figure

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things out easily, and a little bit before he did.

For example, Ju Long still couldn't figure out how he could arrive at almost the same time of day on the same day after crossing the international dateline. He seemed to be getting it wrong by twelve hours.

But, to her, it made perfect sense: "We're traveling for roughly fourteen hours," she said, "and crossing ten time zones going East. That adds up to plus twenty-four hours. Then, we crossed the international date line moving East, which gives us a minus twenty-four hours. We end up when we started."

For her it was easy. For him, impossible.

* * *

Ms. Thompson's personality didn't help any, either. It's not that she was unpleasant.

Just the opposite. She was generally happy and friendly to everyone she met.

That's what it was! She was just so damned *happy*! Nothing seemed to bother her.

When an old woman had grunted disapproval over the vertical cuddling she was doing with her husband, archaeologist Glen Trudeau, at the Beijing airport before getting on the flight, she greeted it by tossing her head dismissively, and hissing "Pffst!" Then, she went back to the vertical cuddling.

If the old lady didn't want to be nice, she was beneath Ms. Thompson's contempt.

When everyone was upset that the airplane was delayed at the ramp, she just shrugged, and said: "We don't have a bus to catch. We've already caught it."

He assumed she was referring to the airplane that was now delaying them.

Instead of being cross, like everyone else, she just sat quietly with a complacent smile, waiting as if time meant nothing.

Everyone else, including him, was pushing and shoving to get through their lives, while she just strolled. She seemed to always do exactly as she pleased, and get away with it easily. The seas of life seemed to simply part for her without even being asked.

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After fourteen hours, it was starting to get on his nerves.

During the first part of their flight, before boredom and bedtime by their internal clocks – still operating on Beijing time – had put them to sleep, she'd chattered about her work using remotely operated vehicles to map sunken treasure ships in the United States. Then, she'd quizzed him about his work at the People's Committee for Cultural Education, and laws governing the conduct of archeology in China. Finally, she'd wanted to know all about home life in modern China.

* * *

Ju Long knew, of course, that she was an archeology graduate student at a prestigious American university, who had come to China with her husband, who was an archeology professor on sabbatical collaborating with researchers at Beijing University. That's how Ju Long had first come to meet her.

Mercifully, about the time he could take no more of her conversation, and was falling asleep in his seat, she decided she wanted to meditate for a while. Then, she seemed to fade into the background, intruding on Ju Long's consciousness no more than the empty seat next to her. She became as furniture.

She still had a quiet, blissful expression on her face when the clatter of breakfast(?) service awoke him some four hours later.

After breakfast, she'd disappeared for a while.

When he walked back to use the lavatory, he saw her standing in avid conversation with a pretty female flight attendant. He wasn't close enough to overhear what they were talking about, but it involved a lot of eye contact, leaning close, whispering and giggling.

Later, she came back to her seat, and pulled out what looked like a novel printed in a strange alphabet.

"It's Sanskrit," she replied to his query. "I haven't read the *Bhagavad Gita* in a long time. It's a beautiful poem, and makes great reading on a long flight."

"You read Sanskrit," he observed.

"Yes," she replied guardedly, as if unsure why he would think she didn't. "I read many languages. Sanskrit's the key language in an important part of the world, and one that is important to me, personally."

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“So, you’re a Hindu?” he guessed, not quite knowing what to expect from her.

“No, I’m a Zen Buddhist,” she replied, “but it’s part of the same tradition.”

“You realize,” he pointed out, “that Zen was developed in China as a fusion between Indian Buddhism and Chinese Taoism.”

“Yes. That’s one reason I wanted to take time from my research to come here when I had the chance. I’ve been learning as much about Taoism as I can from people in China who still practice it.”

That got them into a long conversation about religion in modern China, and how ordinary Chinese people dealt with living in a country where the official state religion was Communist atheism.

How much did ordinary Chinese know about their own cultural history? She had been studying with monks in centers of Taoist faith, not talking to ordinary people. She wanted his opinion as a representative of the dominant Communist authority as well as someone who had grown up among ordinary Chinese people.

* * *

During their short layover in San Francisco, Ms. Thompson started looking forward to getting home to Arizona.

“I can’t wait to see my Baby,” she blurted out, enthusiastically, practically bouncing with excitement in her seat on the automated tram carrying them between terminals.

Did that mean she had an infant in Arizona, while she and her husband were in China? Ju Long didn’t think his wife would approve of that. Women were supposed to devote their lives to their babies, not abandon them to visit monasteries on the other side of the world.

Ju Long knew that Dr. Trudeau was Ms. Thompson’s second husband.

She had talked about her adventurous life that evening he’d first met her, and in the weeks since, when she’d been coming in and out of his office looking for leads to people she could talk to about early Chinese history and culture.

That first evening, she had accompanied Dr. Trudeau and a group of visiting foreign archaeologists to a social dinner at Ju

Long's home. It was a dinner party to welcome them when they'd first arrived in China.

There were several visiting foreign archaeologists, as well as the entire faculty from Beijing University's Archeology Department and their wives. Ms. Thompson, however, had been the only wife accompanying one of the foreign archaeologists, so she'd been a center of attention.

Ju Long's wife had not approved of Ms. Thompson. His wife didn't think Ms. Thompson's behavior was appropriate for a young woman, no matter how intelligent or well educated she was. She was just too forward, and not very moral according to his wife's traditional views.

Of course, "traditional" in modern Chinese society means "Maoist."

Later that evening, after everyone had left, Ju Long's wife had complained about her.

Ms. Thompson had admitted to, and even seemed proud of, having appeared in pornographic videos on the Internet. Something about a "*Kama Sutra*" website she'd created with her first husband.

She'd said she'd battled Cuban pirates, and drug smugglers in Mexico. She'd even had an affair with a Colonel in the Mexican Army!

She'd talked about her friends in the United States who'd made a fortune supplying high-tech weapons to secret agents.

When Ju Long had told his wife that Ms. Thompson would be accompanying him to Arizona to introduce him to those same friends, his wife had been furious. It was only when he explained that there was a crisis at the People's Committee, which only Ms. Thompson's friends were equipped to help resolve, that his wife grudgingly gave permission for him to make the trip.

Of course, she didn't really have any say in the matter. Ju Long didn't have a choice. He had to make the trip as part of his job. He had to meet with Ms. Thompson's friends to ask for their help, and he had to travel with Ms. Thompson to do it.

He was just happy that it wasn't going to cause problems for his marriage. His marriage had problems enough, already.

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“I miss her so much!” Ms. Thompson kept chattering excitedly about her Baby. “I haven’t seen her since I came here with Glen. She wrote the software I use to interpret the debris fields I’m mapping, and figure out how artifacts get scattered during shipwrecks.”

So, it wasn’t an infant whom she’d somehow left behind, but a female co-worker with whom Ms. Thompson was extremely close – close enough to call her “Baby.” That made a difference, but he wasn’t sure it was any better.

“Is that who we’ll be meeting with at Scottsdale Systems Technology?” he asked.

“Not exactly. Her husband founded SST, and still runs it. *He’s* the one we’re here to see, although she’ll probably be involved, too.

He designs the hardware, while she writes a lot of the software. She also makes a lot of important decisions for the company.

They’ll probably work together on your project. It’ll be a high-profile project for the company, and she manages most of their high-profile projects.”

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