



RED BARCHETTA

By

Debbie Kuhn

Seventeen-year-old Charles McKinnon's nerdiness factor had disappeared completely because of her. He had an ultra-cool rep now, and the love of his life would always be sexy and lightning fast – better than a steady girlfriend.

Charles had just been accepted into Harvard – his father's dream, not his. But that didn't matter. For his academic achievement, he'd been rewarded with the one thing he'd wanted most since the age of thirteen: a red Fiat Barchetta – a two-seater Italian sports car, baby.

For her, Charles had let his dark brown hair grow longer, tossed out his preppy clothing, and had even switched to contacts so he could show off the fake “troubled” look in his blue eyes, à la James Dean.

Yeah, the expensive new toy had changed his life. Even college girls wanted to be seen with him.

On the weekends, he would take his dates for a drive up Pacific Highway, a road that hugged the rocky coastline between Santa Carla and Carmel. Lots of sharp curves to get a guy's adrenalin pumping – and scare the girls so badly they would scream and bury their pretty faces in his black leather jacket.

Kickass.

After graduation in June, he scored big with one of the nineteen-year-old college girls he'd been trying to impress for months. Her name was Gypsy Pinella, and she was the real deal – a free spirit who didn't give a damn what the world thought of her dark makeup, outrageous clothes and fiery red hair.

This gal was loads of dangerous fun.

“Christ, Charlie, can't you go any faster?”

He couldn't scare Gypsy. Hell, she would stand up in the convertible – holding on to the top of the windshield – while he screeched around all the tightest curves.

Charles laughed. “I'm glad you're not driving. You're a frickin' loon.”

Gypsy plopped back into her seat, swept aside her windblown locks, and stared at him with reproachful, remarkable green eyes. “You wouldn't let me drive this car?”

“Not on this road I wouldn't.” *Probably not anywhere, actually.*

She stuck out her full lower lip, pouting. It looked real cute.

“Forget it, babe.”

Gypsy smiled. “Bet I'll change your mind. I can handle a stick better than you think.”

Before Charles knew what was happening, the redhead had his jeans unzipped and was stroking him hard and fast. He almost lost his grip on the wheel, and barely managed to downshift soon enough to handle the next curve.

“Not fair,” he said, moaning.

She giggled. “You’re having fun, though, ain’t ya?”

Charles didn’t have to answer that question with words.

Gypsy grinned in triumph.

Over the next five days, Charles gave in to Gypsy twice, letting her drive his pride and joy around on some of the low-traffic inland roads. She scared the hell out of him, like he knew she would.

The next Saturday evening, with the tipsy redhead laughing beside him, he cruised over to Pacific Highway. It was payback time for those two near heart attacks she’d given him earlier that week - though he doubted he could really freak her out.

The salty air felt cooler than usual and Gypsy was acting wilder than he’d ever seen her. She kicked off her high-heeled sandals and stood up in the seat as the Barchetta zoomed down the first straightaway. The savage wind tore at her thin, tie-dyed t-shirt, outlining her small, perky breasts.

Charles had trouble keeping his eyes on the road. He appreciated the view, sure, but he was starting to get a bad vibe.

“Hey, babe, enough of the daring ‘tude. Sit down and hold on to me for a change.”

Gypsy threw her head back and laughed. “I want to fly, Charlie.”

She released her grip on the car altogether and stretched both arms out and back, pretending to soar.

“Gypsy, cut it out. I mean it.”

Charles looked back at the road and downshifted, preparing to take another sharp curve. Just as he squealed into the bend, the car’s right front tire hit a cavernous pothole.

In a matter of seconds, Gypsy was gone.

Three nights later, Charles woke up shaking and sweating and feeling like he had to vomit – feeling like he had when he’d first seen Gypsy’s slight, broken body crumpled across a pile of sharp stones.

The awful memories rushed back.

God, he hadn’t been able to think at first. He knew he’d be blamed. What if his father’s money failed to help him escape all the charges? He would still lose his license and his most prized possession – the Fiat Barchetta.

Gypsy was barely alive when he found her by the side of the road. Charles told himself there was no way she would survive – there was no way an ambulance would arrive in time to save her.

It wasn’t his fault. Everybody knew the girl was crazy. He’d warned her to be careful. Why should he have to suffer for her foolish mistake?

Charles knew he had to act quickly before another car happened upon the scene. He threw off his leather jacket, gathered Gypsy up in his arms, and hurried over to the other side of the highway, to the sheer, rocky drop off above the churning sea.

Christ, could he really do this? Could he live with himself afterwards?

The sun was setting fast.

Bile rose into his throat and he choked it back, tears filling his eyes. He had no choice.

Charles took a deep breath and laid Gypsy on the ground, right at the cliff's edge. Just before he rolled her body over, he thought he saw her eyelids flicker open.

But it was too late to stop her from falling.

He didn't look afterwards. No, he couldn't. He had to get moving. He had to get home, make sure he got rid of his bloody t-shirt and any other evidence left behind.

And that's exactly what he did – never thinking of the nightmares to follow.

Charles decided not to sleep very much.

He'd covered his tracks and wasn't really worried about being connected to Gypsy's death – if her body was ever discovered. Her disappearance was in the news, but as far as he knew, no one had even seen them together on that last terrible day. The police hadn't come calling.

He just needed to stay busy to keep the bad memories from haunting him.

Ten days after the "incident," he met a foreign exchange student his age, a pretty, dark-eyed French girl named Noelle. She had a sweet, innocent smile and an adorable accent.

Noelle was the total opposite of Gypsy.

Charles liked her right off, and he didn't have long to impress her. She'd be returning to Paris the following week, so he spent the next several days showing Noelle the sights

around Santa Carla. He avoided taking her up Pacific Highway until the evening before she was scheduled to fly home.

For some reason he felt compelled to drive by the spot where Gypsy had died – where he had killed her. He took that same curve more slowly than the last time, but Noelle still let out a shriek and grabbed his arm.

“Charles, please, be careful.”

He smiled at her reassuringly. “Don’t worry – this car is like a part of me. I know our limits.”

Another, familiar voice spoke up from behind him. “Well, I sure as hell wish I’d known. Maybe I’d be sitting in Frenchie’s place right now – alive and kicking.”

Charles thought he might be losing his mind. That sounded like Gypsy.

His vision blurred for a moment and he got lightheaded, but he forced himself to look in the rearview mirror.

Gypsy was sprawled across the back of the sports car. She met his gaze in the mirror with a smug little smile. She looked perfectly normal – wearing the same clothes she’d died in.

“Christ.” Charles almost swerved off the road.

Noelle squealed. “That is not funny. No more games.”

Gypsy let out an exaggerated yawn. “God, what a killjoy. I can’t believe you replaced *moi* with such a wimpy chick, Charlie. You could’ve done a lot better.”

“Shut up,” Charles said, staring at Gypsy via the rearview mirror. “You’re not real. You’re not really here.”

“What do you mean, *chéri*?” Noelle gave him a puzzled look. “Are you angry with

me?”

Charles shook his head. “No, I’m not talking to you. Just got something on my mind right now, that’s all.”

Gypsy’s shrill laughter rang in his ears. “I’m just a guilt trip, is that what you think, Charlie?”

He took the next curve dangerously fast, hoping more speed would somehow slingshot the impossible vision into oblivion. But it didn’t work.

Noelle stared at him, her dark eyes full of fear. “What is wrong, Sharles? Please tell me.”

“Yeah, spill *your* guts for a change, Charlie. Honesty is the best policy in any new relationship, right?”

Charles gripped the steering wheel more tightly, his palms sweaty. “This just isn’t happening.”

“Oh, chill out, baby,” Gypsy said, sighing. “I’m not back for revenge. Hell, if I’d been in your shoes, maybe I’d have done the same thing. I just wanted one more wild ride for old time’s sake. You understand?”

Charles swallowed hard and downshifted for another tight turn. Still too fast. The tires left the pavement for several seconds before he got control again.

Noelle let loose with what could only have been a string of French cuss words. “Take me home, Sharles. Now, please.”

“Hmmm, better do what Frenchie asks, Charlie. She might just try to jump out of the car if you don’t. Then you’d have another mess to clean up.”

Charles swung into a scenic overlook, turned around, and headed south again. His

head hurt so bad he thought his skull was going to explode. He glanced in the rearview mirror and saw that Gypsy was now standing up, her arms outstretched just like before.

She laughed. “No need to worry, hon. That’s the good thing about being dead – nothing worse can happen to you.”

Noelle was staring straight ahead, her arms crossed, a frown on her heart-shaped face.

Charles put a hand on her knee. “I’m sorry, Noelle.” She had to think he was a raving lunatic.

“Oh, she’s not the girl for you, Charlie. Forget about her.”

I really am going crazy, he thought, worried that he might start to hyperventilate. *No, get a grip.*

Maybe it was just a temporary breakdown from stress. He’d recover as soon as he got home. All he had to do was stay off Pacific Highway in the future.

Charles took the curves more carefully, trying not to piss Noelle off even more. As they once again approached the tragic spot where it all happened, his chest got tighter and his breathing became shallower.

He glanced in the mirror again. Gypsy had disappeared.

Charles let out a heavy sigh of relief, his hands trembling on the wheel. She was really gone.

Noelle giggled and lifted her arms above her head, stretching luxuriously. She practically purred. “Oh, this feels intoxicating. I love it.”

Her accent had disappeared. She sounded like Gypsy.

Charles’ mouth dropped open as Noelle stood up in her seat. She held on to the top of the windshield and threw her head back, laughing hysterically, her black curls dancing

in the ocean breeze.

“What the hell are you doing?” Charles looked back at the road. The infamous curve was approaching.

“I want to fly, Charlie.”

“Stop it, Noelle – Gypsy – whoever the hell you are.”

More laughter. “Okay, baby. I’ll sit down again, just like you want.”

The girl that was supposed to be Noelle fell back into the seat and clutched his arm tightly, hiding her face against his leather jacket.

Charles hit the curve a little too fast. “Christ Almighty.”

“Oh, Charlie, remember when I said I didn’t want revenge?” The possessed Noelle looked up at him with one of Gypsy’s wicked expressions. “That was a big, fat *lie*.”

She grabbed the wheel and wrenched it sharply to the right.

There was no guardrail to slow them down. Charles struggled frantically, trying to regain control of the car, but there was no time to recover.

His shrieks of terror competed with Gypsy’s wild laughter as the red Barchetta shot out into open space above the roiling sea. It seemed to hover in midair for a short, hopeful eternity before tilting forward and plummeting two hundred feet to the rocky shore below.

THE END