

Redline Deadline

by Charlie Cole

I ran for the car, heart pounding in my chest, feverish. I jerked the door open and dropped into the seat of the Audi S5. The ignition fired and the car purred to life. I dropped it into gear and hit the gas, tires spinning, gravel spraying. The treads caught on the hot blacktop of the road and screamed in protest as they struggled to gain purchase. Slipping, then grabbing at last and the Audi thrust forward in sheer acceleration. My foot mashed the accelerator to the floor and I caught sight of the tachometer needle in my peripheral vision arcing up, higher and higher. I used the paddles on the steering wheel and upshifted, letting the car have its way, coaxing it to higher and higher speeds.

She was out there, waiting for me. The woman with the grey eyes. Eyes the color of a summer storm just before the lightning flashed and the thunder rumbled. I needed to be there and there was no way that I could get there fast enough.

Clutch. Shift. Gas.

A pickup truck was laboring down the road in front of me, the chipped paint already long infested with the cancer of rust. Its tires were near flat and would be fortunate to get the driver home. I accelerated and cut the curve tight to the left, pushing hard, not seeing the oncoming tanker truck until it was almost too late. The air horn cut through the fog in my mind and brought me reeling back to reality.

I growled a curse under my breath and steered into the gravel, controlled the skid, counter-steering as I went. The tanker passed in a buffeting wave of wind and fury. I corrected and brought the Audi back to the road and past the lumbering pickup truck.

Damn. Too close.

I couldn't be stupid. If I didn't get there in time... If I left her waiting.... expecting me. I'd never be able to live with myself. If I lived at all. I pushed the Audi back onto the road, hoping for clear

traffic and finding none. It was worse, the arteries of the roadway choked with family vans and commuters and delivery trucks.

My phone rang and I recoiled in my seat. Fuck.

I slid the Bluetooth earpiece in place and hit the button.

"Charlie Cole," I said through clenched teeth, steering past a Ford Mustang who mistakenly thought I wanted to race. I nearly put him into the guardrail for his trouble.

"Where are you?"

God, it was her. The woman. Her voice was tense like piano wire.

"On my way."

"What's taking so long?" No bullshit. All business. Curt and hard.

I saw them then in the rearview mirror. Twin Ducati motorcycles. Blood red bikes. Riders in black. Face shields down. They shared a look, a nod, then came at me fast.

"Gotta go."

"God damn it, Charlie--" Was the last thing I heard before I rang off and crushed the accelerator to the floor.

The Audi shrieked but complied. The engine built in power and intensity like a piston-powered orchestra, reaching new heights and rifts as I pushed harder. I saw the offramp ahead and tried to drift away from it as much as I could, plotting my course as the Ducatis closed fast. At the last possible second, I spun the wheel, cutting off a semi truck and a cube van. Their air brakes locked, struggling desperately to stop. I collided with one Ducati rider to my right just as he was leveling the Goncz machine pistol through the passenger window. He struggled to maintain balance but the Audi was too powerful, pushing too hard, and he lost the battle and capsized hard, hitting the pavement helmet first before the front tire of the semi truck engulfed him, bouncing over him and the bike as it went. One down. One to go.

I steered the Audi up the offramp, scanning frantically for the sign to show which way to turn. That was when my rear window exploded and the sound of gunfire assaulted my ears. The remaining Ducati rider was firing at me one-handed as he tried to close the distance

behind me. The jacketed hollowpoints ripped into the headrest beside me. What he made up for in speed, he lost in accuracy.

I stomped hard on the brake, and the Audi nearly stood up on its nose coming to a stop. The Ducati rider hadn't expected it and released his weapon, trying to compensate. His motorcycle slammed into the Audi's trunk and the rider sprawled to the pavement. I dropped the car in reverse and backed up. Thump-thump. Shifted back into gear. Thump-thump. I pulled ahead and found the sign I needed and turned right.

She wasn't far now. I could get there. It would be fine...

The thought had barely formed when the Chrysler 300 broadsided the Audi. I had never seen him coming. The other driver must have been laying in wait for the ambush, ready for me if the Ducati riders failed. He timed the collision perfectly, leaving me dazed, reeling and sliding. I tried to correct the skid, to steer out of it, but he was pushing me along, perpendicular to the road. I looked up and saw him. Sunglasses, short hair, the muzzle of the machine pistol....

I accelerated, steering into his vehicle and for a moment the crashing embrace of the cars was broken. The air split with the thunder of the machine pistol and a window exploded, covering me in auto glass.

"Son of a bitch..." It was my own voice, but sounded distant, separate from me. I realized how close we were to the woman and I wondered if I'd led them to her. Her place was close, overlooking the valley. I didn't want to die on her doorstep. I didn't come all this way, having done the things I'd done, just to fucking die on her front lawn.

I screamed in rage and anger and crashed the Audi into the Chrysler. I saw the driver's head rock back like he'd taken a jab to the chin. I steered into him harder, our cars side by side. He leveled the machine pistol at my window and swept the side of the Audi with a stream of bullets. I ducked and cranked the wheel hard, slamming my foot down on the gas.

I raised my head enough to see the other driver. We were spinning, locked side by side in a death grip, our two cars almost

fused together in impact. I saw her house then, just off the road. We were headed right for it....

And the cliff that overlooked the valley below...

I braked hard, trying to stop my car before I got to the edge. Before I fell to my death with this ruthless son of a bitch. Before I disappointed her....

The tires ground hard, brakes digging in, ABS shuddering as we slid toward the edge. The Chrysler was closer to the cliff when we finally stopped and I saw a glimmer of a smile from the driver when he realized that we weren't going to fall. Then his car lurched and his smile dropped and he brought up the machine pistol and the muzzle looked like a fucking tunnel as it centered on my forehead....

I wasn't going to die for him that day. She was waiting for me....

I grabbed the door handle and kicked the door hard, pushing against the Chrysler. The driver's weapon fired high, smashing the rearview mirror as his vehicle slid back, back down the cliff and over the edge. I sat in the Audi and heard the Chrysler tumble down the cliff, rolling down into the valley below. It didn't explode like in the movies. But I knew the driver was pulp inside.

"Charlie?" I heard her voice.

It was her. The woman with the grey eyes.

I opened the car door and stumbled out. My body rebelled as the adrenaline drained and my knees buckled and I fell hard, falling to the ground and smacking my head. Grit and gravel ground into the wound. I wiped at it and my hand came away covered in soil and blood.

I looked up and saw her then. She was standing over me. Her hair dark, eyes the beautiful, exotic grey that I remembered behind her glasses. She stood with her hands on her hips, looking down at me.

"Jesus tits, Chaz, what took you so long??" she said it with only the slightest smirk on her face.

"Hi.... Erin," I managed. My heart was pounding in my chest. My hands trembled. "Sorry it took me so long to get here."

Erin walked closer and bent down, reaching out her hand. I smiled and it hurt, my pulse throbbing in my temple at my head wound, but still I smiled.

I saw her pink nail polish on her short fingernails as she took the car keys from my hand.

"It's about fucking time you showed up," she said. Her smile was absolutely to die for. She ruffled the hair on my head and stepped over me. She sat down in the Audi, fired up the engine and pulled away.

"Glad I'm here," I managed and passed out.

