# Car Lot Cowboy

by Addison Griffis

Marcel Vickers stared at a bullet hole in the hood of his pearl Mercedes parked in Magnolia Motors' used car lot. As he gazed and sipped scorched coffee from a Styrofoam cup, the speck of blackness seemed to spread across metal luster. His navy Western shirt, adorned with a rose patch on each sleeve, clung to his skin in the Mis- sissippi humidity. He scowled at the task of con- vincing a prospect to pay top dollar for the damaged Mercedes on the final day of the deal- ership's Fourth of July sale extravaganza. Vickers placed his cup on the ruined hood. He snatched open the diamond snap-button of his chest pocket, shook out a cigarette from the carton. The cigarette bobbed in his mouth as he cursed the Mercedes and texted the parts man- ager for a quote on a replacement. Gonna be at least 1400. Vickers lit his cigarette. I'm getting fucked with- out being kissed for that price. Vickers blew out smoke, lifted his white Stetson cowboy hat, and ran his fingers through his blonde hair, tucking stray strands behind his ears. Stephen, a salesman on the lot, snuck up be- hind Vickers and slapped his back, knocking the cigarette from the sales manager's mouth. "Aye, ole Buddy, I got a trade I need you to step up in." "All this bullshit on my last day at work." Vickers popped another cigarette into his mouth. "I'm damn near broke from the divorce, and now I have to replace the hood or find a fucking pro- spect who doesn't give a damn." "Yeah, I saw that shit earlier this morning when I was walking the lot." Stephen held out a form with the info for a prospect's trade-in. "I didn't want to be the one to tell you that some- body drove by last night and shot the hell out this fucker." "Naw, the hole is too wide for a straight-on shot." Vickers shook his head as he took the form and shoved it in his back pocket. "That bul- let tumbled from the sky. Those hoodlums across town started firing their fucking Glocks off into the air when everybody was shooting fireworks last night and hit the car. That's fucking odds for ya." "Dude, just check this out." Stephen reached into his pocket and dropped a mushroomed .45 hollow point onto Vickers' palm. "Somebody shot the shit out of your car with a big ass bullet. I found it up against the engine block." Stephen tucked his gold chain and crucifix beneath his red polo shirt. "Still runs good, I grabbed your spare key from the showroom box." Customers on the way back from a test drive wheeled a silver diesel dually into a parking spot at the front of the dealership, and Stephen headed toward them. "I bet you'll find your customer before the day's over." Vickers' phone buzzed. A text from a number not stored in his contacts flashed across the screen. You are a coward, not a cowboy. Vickers' fingers coiled over the bullet. I think you got the wrong number. A picture of Vickers's business card pinched by a man's hand appeared on the screen. Black spade tattooed on the thumb. I ain't got time for games. Say that shit to my face. Vickers shoved his phone into his pocket and scanned the lot. As customers browsed like cattle through rows of shiny metal, a tall thin man wea- ring a tropical print tank top and cut-off jean shorts emerged from a maroon-colored mobile firework stand in the barren dirt lot across from the dealership. Chrome aviators flashed in the sunlight. The man's long black curls rippled in

the wind as he stood clutching a three-foot sleeve of firecrackers. The crushed bullet felt hot in Vickers' hand. The firecracker man adjusted his shades. He waved an arm riddled with flash art and mo- tioned Vickers to come over. Vickers threw his cigarette on the ground and stamped it out with his alligator boots. He downed the rest of his coffee. "Fucking fruit cake." Vickers shoved the bullet in his pocket. He made his way back inside the dealership, where desk phones rang like summer solstice wedding bells. Cool air chilled the sweat on his forehead as his boot heels kept a steady cadence against large, sand-colored tiles. Vickers entered his glass- wall office set in the middle of the showroom. He hung his cowboy hat on a brass hook of an old wooden hat rack in the corner of the office and then eased down in his brown leather chair. Vickers removed a bottle of Woodford Reserve from the bottom drawer of his metal desk. He filled the Styrofoam cup and watched salesmen hold gross and close customers. Vickers flipped through his Rolodex and called everyone he knew about buying the Mer- cedes. And when the high mileage and asking price became a quick deterrent to all prospects, he'd slam down his phone, take a sip of whiskey and flip to the next card. The front door of the dealership let out a shrill squeak. Vickers looked up from his Rolo- dex and saw a white girl with rainbow-colored dreads walking toward his office. Flip flops smacked her heels. Her cotton-white romper be- came cheeky mid-stride. She clutched a brown leather purse. Tangerine nail polish. Vickers rose from his chair. He placed his knuckles on the cool pane of glass that covered his desk to steady himself from the whiskey buzz. "Can I help you?" The girl stopped at the threshold of the of- fice. "I want to speak to your Finance Manager. I need to get approved." "Our finance guy works every other Satur- day. But I'm sales manager here. I can help. You have any credit?" "No." Rainbow dreads brushed the girl's jaw- line as she shook her head. "It ain't looking too good for you, sweet- heart." Vickers rapped his knuckles against the glass top. "But I have a car that I'm ready to move. Take a seat and let's take a look at your credit just to see what we are working with." He sat in his chair. Removed a silver pen from his pocket and clicked it. "Most folks don't know shit about what kind of credit they have." The girl sat down in one of the black leather chairs in the office. Vickers took her information and learned her name was Tessa, nearly twenty years his junior. He added three years to her job time at the glove factory, promoted her to shift manager, and gave her a two thousand dollar raise to round things out. Vickers slid the credit app across to Tessa. She looked him in the eye as she signed and pushed the pen and paper across the desk. He transferred her information to the computer and pulled her credit. Tessa rubbed an esoteric geometrical design tattooed on the left side of her neck as if wishing the Kosmos for good luck. Seven hundred Equifax. Six eighty TransU- nion. Holy hell. Two lines of credit. Four thousand dollar high. ## Fuck. A short-term loan with twelve percent inter- est from the piece of shit credit union downtown and a Victoria Secret credit card paid perfect. Vickers pushed the spring-loaded end of his pen down on the desk. The pen shot up, and he caught it. "Your score's low and file a little thin. That seafoam green sled of a Chrysler what you drove up in?" "Yeah that's my trade, got the title in my purse." "I'm going to give you what my wholesaler will give me. Two-fifty. You got any down pay- ment?" Vickers wrote numbers on a buyer's

order. A salesman without a customer at his desk scowled at him through the glass for not turning the girl over. “No.” Tessa propped her elbows on the desk and crossed her arms. “Is that going to keep me from buying a car?” Vickers stopped writing. The tip of his pen waivered his grip. “You’re going to have to bring something to the table, my dear.” “How much?” Vickers clicked his pen. “Three thousand.” “I don’t have anywhere close to that.” “How much?” “None.” “The banks won’t like that.” Vickers leaned back in his chair. “Especially since your credit score is below five hundred.” “I think we can work something out.” Tessa crossed her arms. “You gonna co-sign with me?” “Your rainbow-colored ass ain’t fucking up my credit.” Tessa smiled, shook her head. “Well I don’t have any extra money.” Vickers took a sip of whiskey. “I heard you the first time.” He refilled the Styrofoam cup with Woodford and pushed it across the desk. “You got something worth three thousand dol- lars." She looked down at the offering then up at him. “I ain’t a whore.” “And I ain’t a pimp, but you better bring something to the table or you ain’t gonna ride.” “I don’t even know what I’m buying or for what price.” “You’re buying a Mercedes. High mileage, but runs like the day I bought’er. Just one small blemish on the hood.” Tessa’s green eyes widened. “I can’t afford that.” “That just depends on the interest rate and how long we stretch it out.” Tessa took the cup and downed the liquid. “You aren’t into any weird shit, are you?” “Weird shit?” Vickers took a sip from the whiskey bottle. “You talking like butt stuff? No darlin, I just fuck.” “You get high?” Tessa brushed a violet lock from her face. Vickers stood and removed a room card from his snakeskin wallet. “That Western Motel just across the street.” He handed the card to her. “Room thirty-eight. It’s on the end there out by the canal. Just go on in and make yourself at home. It’s almost quitting time.” Tessa left the dealership with the room key and cup of whiskey in hand. Vickers strolled out his office into a show- room without a customer. “I don’t know about the rest of y’all.” He snatched eight cups from the water cooler dispenser. “This summer dust got my throat a little scratchy. How about one last drink with your sales manager? Because after today, I don’t ever——” “Want to see your cheap ass again.” Stephen jumped up from his chair and rallied the rest of the salesmen. They locked the front door, cut off most of the lights, and crammed into Vickers’ of- fice. Vickers removed an unmarked bottle full of jade tequila from his drawer. “This Mexican Chernobyl shit been simmering in my office all goddamn summer.” Vickers shook the bottle. Medallion slices of jalapeno swirled. The sales team passed the wretched tequila around while they drank and boasted and bragged with burning tongues about the head- knockers they’d thrown to smiling customers, and other men’s wives that they had fucked in the backseat during test drives. They cursed every rich bastard who showed no quarter when hag- gling over trades that they still scooped and re-sold for small fortunes. Stephen raised his glass. “To Marcel T. Vickers, the best damn sales manager in the tri- county area . . . and the last cowboy of the car lot.” Everyone cheered and chugged what liquor remained in their cups. “Aye, aye, ole buddy.” Vickers grasped

Stephen by his shoulder. “Y’all are all cowboys.” He gazed around the room. “All goddamn cowboys. Hell, you got to be in this fucking busi- ness.” He grabbed the tequila and strolled into the showroom. “Now all of y’all have a good night.” Vickers adjusted his crotch and knocked the bottle against the turquoise stone inlay of his belt buckle. “I have one last down payment to col- lect.” Howls echoed through the halls of the deal- ership. Vickers left through the side door of the showroom. He journeyed past the used cars, and his phone buzzed when he got to the road. Traffic sped by as Vickers stood and watched a surveillance video of his Mercedes pulling up to the garage door of another man’s house. The timestamp jumped forward a couple of days, and the garage door opened, revealing a mobile fire- work stand painted maroon. All I can say is that your wife invited me over. Vickers crossed the road and made his way through tall weeds growing in cracks of the motel parking lot. Shards of brown beer bottle glass crunched under his feet as he traveled along the iron fence that circled an empty concrete pool. Vickers drummed his knuckles against the door as he entered his room. The lamp on the nightstand illuminated wallpaper covered in pictures of succulents, casting light across Tessa laid up against the bed’s backboard. Tessa shot the rest of her whiskey. “You’re talking about that pearl Mercedes on the lot, right?” “Yep.” Vickers slid the chain lock into place. “I could definitely ride around in that.” She rummaged through her purse. “How long you been living here?” Vickers laid his cowboy hat on his suitcase and stood by the side of the bed. “Long enough to plan my next move.” “What’s that?” Tessa removed a zip-lock bag filled with crimson gummy-shaped stars the size of quarters. “Take a train out west to Colorado or Wyo- ming. I don’t care. I’ll find work.” He eyed crim- son stars and placed the tequila beside a potted cactus on the nightstand. “What the hell are those?” “You want to get high, don’t you?” Tessa shook the plastic bag. “These are death stars. They’ll fuck you six ways to Sunday.” She extended the bag to Vickers, and he took one. “I’d only eat half a star if you’ve never tried edibles before.” Vickers ate a star. “I ain’t scared of your hip- pie-ass snacks.” He grabbed two more from the bag before Tessa could pull it away. “So why you living here?” Tessa put a single star on her tongue and shoved the bag into her purse. “Cheap weekly rates.” He tossed a gummy in his mouth. “Short walk to work.” He popped another. “Wife kicked me out my own goddamn house about six months ago.” “Why?” “Shit that happened in this room. Shit that might get me killed one day.” “So you gonna take your boots off before you get in bed?” “I do things the outlaw way.” “This is the weird shit I was talking about.” Tessa winced and arched her back. Vickers lit a cigarette and sat down on the bed with his back to her. The haze of smoke grew thicker in the room with each puff. Tessa put her hand on Vickers shoulder, and he shrugged her off. “You work at the glove factory.” Vickers knocked the ashes of his cigarette across the potted cactus on the nightstand. “You know ## Drew?” “Drew from shipping and receiving? Yeah, I know him, always riding around on the forklift, loading and unloading.” Tessa squinted at Vickers. “Are you like his dad or uncle?” “Father.” Tessa clutched her face and shook her head. “Jesus Christ, will the next safety meeting be awk- ward.”

“You know he could do so much more than that.” “What’s wrong with driving a tow-motor?” “I never pictured my son barely making ten dollars an hour.” Vickers turned and shook his cigarette at her. “You know he couldn’t buy a sin- gle unit off the new lot? Even with good credit? That’s what’s fucking wrong.” “If you think he could make his life better, I think you need to tell him that yourself.” Vickers shook his head. “We haven’t talked in forever. Doesn’t even know where I stay.” “I’d give anything to talk to my father again. It just ain’t right that y’all don’t talk.” “Maybe we just need space as big as the god- damn horizon.” His long exhale swirled smoke. “I think you got a bad batch of them marijuana gummy bears.” He snuffed the cigarette out in the dirt of the cactus pot. “I’m sober as Saint Peter. Time to put your sweet ass in a new ride.” A grin remained on Tessa’s face as she grabbed her purse. Vickers open the door just enough to check if anyone would see them leave. He took Tessa by the hand and led her down the sidewalk, passing fancy cars with tags from neighboring counties. The edge of darkness washed away the color of fire in the sky as they traveled to the dealership. The two crossed into the lot, and when they got to the Mercedes, Vickers hit the keys in his pocket to make the horn chirp at Tessa, who skipped in delight. They hopped inside the car. Vickers barked the tires and sped to the front of the dealership, where he used his key to enter, keeping the lights off in the showroom as he led Tessa to his office. Vickers sat down in his chair, pulled Tessa onto his lap. He banged the keys on the mouse. The computer screen flashed on. Ivory glow flooded the office. “I’m about to show you how a deal is done, darlin. Can you handle a three-fifty payment?” “How’d you know?” “Cause a three-fifty payment is what every- body wants. Five-thousand dollar sled. Son of a bitch wants three-fifty. Sixty-thousand dollar truck. Three-fifty.” Vickers chuckled. “It’s fucking crazy.” Vickers arranged the figures in his computer and power booked the unit, adding additional safety features and a sport package not found on the Mercedes. Vickers submitted the deal to four banks, and four pending notification boxes popped up next to Tessa’s name on the screen. Her heart- beat pulsed against the palm of his hand. Three red turndown arrows popped up. “Fuck.” Vickers banged the keyboard. Tessa huffed and pulled away from Vickers. “Why did I get turned down when I brought something to the table?” “Thin file.” “You’re not understanding what I’m fucking telling you. Why the fuck did I get turned down when I brought something to the table?” “We still in the game, darlin. One bank is still simmering on it.” A green acceptance arrow appeared by her name. “Well fuck me sideways.” Vickers slapped his desk. “What does that mean?” Vickers pushed Tessa off him. “It means you got approved.” He clicked into the deal. Proof of income required. “Deal has a little hair around it, but we’ll make it happen. Hand me your paystub.” Vickers dialed his finance manager. “Aye ole buddy, I know it’s late, but I have a favor for you, young stud.” He snapped at Tessa to hurry up. “I need you to give this pretty girl in front of me a nice fat figure on her year to date. Make it match what I sent in on the credit app and load that bitch up cause we’re ready to sign.” Tessa dumped the contents of her purse out on the table. They began signing paperwork, and within ten minutes, Tessa became the proud owner of a certified used Mercedes. Vickers faxed all the documents to the bank

as the death star high crept up his spine. “God- damn I’m feeling smooth as Velveeta.” Vickers propped his boots on his desk, kicked back in his chair. Tessa racked her belongings back into her purse. “Aren’t you going to show me everything on my new car?” “Yeah I’m just waiting on my favorite part.” A stack of gold coins popped up by Tessa’s name. Vickers jumped and clapped. “We just got funded.” Vickers shut off his computer, grabbed the spare key from the key-box in the showroom, and the two walked out to the car. “Pleasure doing business.” Vickers handed Tessa her papers, and a flash of green light flooded the night. A boom shook the windows and rattled Vickers’ chest. He braced himself against the Mercedes as he wrestled with the cas- cading of ecstasy from the drugs and the after- image of Tessa’s illuminated face. Streams of golden embers crackled as they fell from above. Columns of flame erupted from fire fountains in the barren lot across the street, spewing smoke clouds that rolled over the ve- hicles. Tessa cried out and collapsed. Blood gushed from the exit wound in her back as her body twitched on the asphalt. The storefront window behind Vickers shattered. Shards of glass broke across the concrete and reflected bursts of fire in the sky. Vickers choked on smoke as he saw the fire- cracker man walking toward him with a chrome .45 in hand. The firecracker man’s shadow pulsed across the asphalt as he took aim. A flash of light erupted from the gun barrel. Vickers stumbled back from the blast. He touched his shoulder. Blood-stained flesh. A bul- let whirred past his head, shattering another win- dow. Vickers ripped open the Mercedes’ door. He grabbed Tessa and pulled her onto the back seat. He shook her limp body and moaned her name as bullets shattered the windows of the vehicle. Leather became slick with blood, and Vickers peered through the shattered windshield to see the firecracker man dumping spent shells of his revolver. “Fuck of a fucking fuck.” Vickers climbed in the front seat and shoved the keys into the ig- nition. Headlights flashed the chrome of the .45. Vickers stomped the gas. The Mercedes sped forward. The firecracker man belly-flopped onto the hood and took hold of a wheel well. Vickers swerved. The Mercedes crashed into an SUV dis- played on the lot, pinning the firecracker man between crushed sheets of pearl and black metal. Vickers pushed open the door and fell onto asphalt. His lungs burned as he crawled to the trunk of the Mercedes. Vickers grasped the tire iron. The night sky thundered no more. Plumes of flames receded into the cones of fire fountains. The firecracker man clawed pearl metal as blood dripped from his mouth. Vickers struck the firecracker man three times across his skull. Sirens wailed in the distance, and iron clanged against asphalt. Vickers took out his cell and scrolled to a text conversation between him and his son that had been inactive for eight months. He typed Western Motel. Room 38 if you ever want to talk. The chatter of his mind grew si- lent as his thumb hovered over send. Vickers looked up from the screen. The dead man’s arms lay sprawled across the hood as if em- bracing the carnage of bent metal. Vickers had observed the Mercedes countless times over the years, but this time he saw an altar of acceptance, where he could take solace for a few minutes. Blue lights flashed across the car lot. He dropped the cellphone onto the asphalt. Vickers put his hands behind his back and kneeled be- fore his idol made manifest by the marriage of man and machine.

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