

Prairie Justice

By J.P. Voss

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Lacy Kit Carson sat alone staring into the open-hearth fireplace of her mother's modest three-bedroom Omaha Nebraska home. The electricity went out, and her cell phone rang. She took the call, but didn't say a word.

"Hello...Lacy. Are you there? It's Booker. I hope it was okay to call. I was worried. Are you okay? Hello? Are you there?"

"I'm sorry Booker. I'm having a really bad night. This storm really has me spooked. On top of that, all the power just went out."

"Here too," he said. "It's pitch black outside, like the earth got swallowed by a supermassive black hole."

Turning from the fire, Lacy gazed out the window. "The world feels so cold tonight. I can't believe how much I still miss my father. It's been three years since daddy died. I miss him so much. Nights like this, I miss him the most. Stormy nights were fun when my dad was alive. Mom and me would curl up by the fire, and my dad would tell lies about Kit Carson and the Old West. He swore we were related."

"I didn't know that."

"I don't tell a lot of people. Honestly—I don't think it's true, but my dad believed it, or at least he acted like he did. If it had been up to him, my first name would have been Kit. You know...as in Kit Carson."

"That's a cool name."

"Seriously Booker. Kit? It has to be the lamest girl's name ever. I'm just glad Nana Carson insisted I be named Lacy, after her mother. Daddy had to settle for Kit as my middle name."

Headlights beamed through the front window as a car swerved in the driveway and skidded to a stop.

"Sorry Booker. I've gotta go. Bye."

Lacy rolled up in her patchwork quilt and hopped to the window. When she saw it was her stepfather Bill, she threw off the quilt and bound through the house toward her bedroom. Pulling the door tight behind her, Lacy yanked back the covers on her neatly made single bed and burrowed under Pendleton sheets. She peaked out as a lightning strike electrified the sky blue room. Ribbons, trophies, and pictures of her horse Creed were scattered everywhere. Creed, a gift from her father, more than anything else, brought back memories of her dad. Times like her seventh birthday, Dad wouldn't say

where they were going, just that it was a surprise. When they pulled down the dirt road to Diamond Stables, Lacy thought they were just going to rent a couple of horses and go riding. Instead, her dad parked by the corral and pointed to a beautiful Black and Brown Gelding Quarter Horse. He didn't say a word; he didn't have to. Lacy locked eyes with Creed and their souls took root. She grabbed the biggest picture off her nightstand and held it to her heart.

"Don't worry love. I'll see you tomorrow for sure." Lacy smooched the photo goodnight. "Sleep tight sweetie."

Alone in the dark, she listened to the battering storm and waited for her mom to get home from work. Lacy didn't hear her mom come in, but she knew her mom was home when her stepfather erupted.

"I'm the man of the house," Bill bellowed. "I make the decisions around here."

Tiptoeing down the hall, Lacy cautiously approached the hall passage. She got on her hands and knees and peered around the opening. She had a clear view through the living room into the dining area. Mom was sitting at the old oak dining table. Her head was bowed, and Bill was barking out the house rules.

"When I make a decision, it's final. Do you understand me woman? I wasn't asking your opinion. I was telling you a fact. You open your pie hole again, and I'll put my boot in it. We clear on that? The subject is closed you damned ignorant bitch. Now where in the hell is my dinner."

Lacy hated the sight of Bill. 5'6" with a gut, he had a pasty complexion, and Lacy always said he looked like that serial killer—John Wayne Gacy. A predatory charlatan, scriptures rolled off his tongue like honey off a bee's butt. Bill talked a good game, but he had the religious convictions of a scoundrel.

Cigar smoke blanketed the dining room, and when Lacy saw the fifth Old Forester sitting on the table, she got sick to her stomach and sunk back down the hallway.

Fatso is getting blitzed again. I can't believe my mother married him. He's such a loser.

A humiliating slap was followed by her mother's muted sobs and the stench from Bill's cigar.

That's bullshit.

Driven beyond fear, Lacy sprung up and stood on her toes. Moving stiff limbed with stuttered steps, she wasn't sure what she was going to do as she came up behind Bill. She thought about kicking him between the legs when Bill turned around.

"You idiot! Don't you hit my mother...don't you ever hit my mother."

"Don't start *Little Missy*. I straightened your mother out. I'll straighten you out too." Bill leaned over, stuck his index finger against Lacy's breastbone, and gave her a dismissive shove. "This whole thing is your fault anyways. Look at all the pain you've caused your mother. I ought to whip you good. There wouldn't be any problem if it weren't for you and that stupid horse of yours."

"Don't push me again. And don't call my horse stupid. Creed's not the problem. You're the only problem around here."

What Bill lacked in character, he made up for with drunken arrogance. He took a hard swig off the booze, a long satisfying toke on the cigar, and then blew smoke in Lacy's face.

“There’s going to be one less problem around here come tomorrow morning. I’m getting rid of that old plow horse.”

“What are you talking about? She’s my horse.” Lacy pushed past Bill and threw herself at her mother’s knees. “Mom, tell him—please. He can’t sell my horse. He can’t.”

Lacy’s mother lowered her head and repeated the words that had been twisted to manipulate her spirit. “Ephesians 5:22, Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord.”

Bill gloated, “That’s right girl. You’d be smart to listen to your mother. She’s a lot better woman since she got right with the Lord.”

Lacy stood toe-to-toe with Bill and said, “You can’t sell my horse. I won’t let you.”

“You don’t have a damn thing to say about it *Little Missy*. I pay the bills around here, and I’m not throwing away anymore of my hard earned money on that broken-down plow horse. I’m meeting a man at the stables tomorrow morning at seven. You can go back to bed and forget about that old horse.”

Booker Lee Harrison huddled close to the wood-burning stove and listened to the steady hum of sleet ricocheting off the sheet-metal roof of the two-bedroom trailer. He sat cross-legged on the floor, gnawing his fingernails, until well after midnight. Booker tried to sleep, but every time he closed his eyes, a lightning strike, or the wind slicing through the Cottonwoods, would startle him awake.

Middle of the night, the suffocating storm showed signs of breaking. Booker stepped to the trailer window and peered through the soaked glass. Outside, a streetlight arced, then illuminated, and the darkness turned a dozen shades of gray. Fitful wind blew mist across the shadows, and Booker was sure he could see things that weren’t really there. A silhouette moved toward the trailer. Slowly taking shape, it was a spectral figure draped in a hooded raincoat and a pair of oversized rubber boots.

Who in the hell would be out on a night like this?

The mysterious figure stepped into the glow of the streetlight, revealing a familiar freckled face, and a pair of glassy blue eyes.

That can’t be Lacy.

Booker darted out the front door in his stocking feet.

“What’s going on? Why are you here? What are you doing out so late? Damn girl—it’s crazy out tonight. Let’s get inside.”

Booker took Lacy by the elbow and pulled her into the trailer. After he helped Lacy out of her soaked outer garments, he nudged her close to the fire.

“You want some hot chocolate?”

Booker’s dad sat up in the Naugahyde recliner. Still half asleep, he acknowledged Lacy with a drowsy smile. Closing one eye, he focused on his wristwatch. “Is everything all right? You’re out kind of late for a girl your age.”

“I’m okay Sir. I couldn’t sleep, so I took a walk. I just got lost in the storm.”

“Are you sure everything is okay?” Mr. Harrison asked. “You’d better call your folks. Let them know you’re okay?”

“She said everything was fine dad. Why don’t you go in the bedroom and get some sleep?”

Booker's dad rubbed his eyes and took a better look at Lacy. "Is this the little redheaded girl from the stables you're always talking about?"

"She's a friend of mine dad," Booker said, putting some milk in the microwave. "She just got lost in the rain. Everything's all right. Why don't you go in the bedroom and go back to sleep? The powers back on, so you can run the electric heater."

Mr. Harrison struggled to stand. Fully erect, he stooped to one side. He said, "You're welcome here anytime young lady. Just do me a favor. Call your folks and let them know you're okay. Booker Lee can give you a ride home on his way to work."

"Are you okay dad. Do you want one of your pain pills?"

"Naw—I don't like those pills. They make me stupid. But I'll take a beer if you're buying. I'm going to go lay down. Do me a favor and bring me a cold brew back in my bedroom."

Booker stepped around his dad into the bathroom and came out with fresh towel for Lacy. He bounced over to the fridge, grabbed a beer, and hustled into his dad's bedroom. Booker handed his dad the suds, and then slapped himself in the forehead with both palms.

"Don't tell Lacy I talk about her all the time. She'll think I'm a stalker."

"Might as well lay your cards on the table son. How she ever going to know if you don't tell her?"

"I don't want her to know. It might scare her."

"Why would you say something like that son?"

"Hello," Booker said, pointing toward his prominent nose.

"That's a Roman nose Booker. You're a good-looking young man."

"Maybe with a little plastic surgery," Book said, turning to the mirrored closet door and pushing his nose flat. "If I could do something about this tumor on my face, maybe I could join the human race."

"That's nuts Booker. Just because your friends razz you and call you Big Bird, your nose doesn't really look like a beak. Once you fill out a little, you'll be fine."

"Forget it dad. It's not going to happen. Lacy hangs around with the cool people in school. My friends and me spend most of our time hiding out in the science lab. We're pretty much the anti-matter of the high school universe. We exist, but nobody can prove it. Right now—I'm just glad to be orbiting around her planet. Landing is out of the question."

"Don't count yourself out Booker. You're one hell of a smart kid. You've got a lot more going for you than a lot of those high school hot shots. In a few years, they won't look so cool."

His dad smiled and mussed his son's hair. Booker kissed his dad on the forehead and closed the door behind him on his way out.

Booker stood in the hallway and watched Lacy get warm by the stove. She stretched her athletic frame, and he thought about the time back in the sixth grade when she beat the whole school, boys included, in a *Fifty-Yard Dash*. Lacy tossed her hair forward and shook out the cold. When she threw her head back, her hair fell across her shoulders like the feathers on a red-tailed hawk. Booker thought it was the color of sweet summer strawberries drenched in honey.

"You want that hot chocolate now?" Booker asked.

“That would be nice.” Lacy placed her hand softly on Booker’s chest and said, “I’m sorry to show up like this. Is your father mad?”

“No...my dad isn’t mad. As long as you’re okay, he’s fine.”

Booker whipped up the cocoa and handed Lacy a warm mug.

“Everything all right?”

“I’d rather not talk about it. Okay? Is your dad all right? He looks like he’s in a lot of pain.”

“He got hurt at work.”

“He’s a truck driver...right?”

“Yeah—he wrenched his back disconnecting a trailer.”

“Is that dangerous?”

“No. But sometimes the release bar on the 5th Wheel gets stuck and you have to pull really hard on it before it’ll come loose.”

“What’s a 5th Wheel?”

“On a *Big Semi*, it’s on the back of the truck above the rear wheels. The kingpin on the trailer locks into it. They’re usually easy to disconnect. All you have to do is push the safety latch out of the way and pull on the handle. The other day my dad was dropping off a trailer and the release bar wouldn’t come loose, so he yanked as hard as he could. The bar came loose, but my dad wrenched his back doing it.”

“I’m sorry. He seems like a really nice man.” Lacy blew across the top of her mug before taking a sip of cocoa. “Do you think you could do me favor?”

“Sure. Anything you need—just let me know.”

“You’re the first one at the stables on Saturday mornings aren’t you?”

“Uh huh, me and the Office Manager. We both start at seven on Saturdays. She has the keys for the main gate.”

“Can I catch a ride with you?”

Booker nodded yes while pulling a pillow and quilt out of the closet. He made cozy spot on the sofa for Lacy.

“Why don’t you lay down here and get some rest? I don’t have to be to work for a few hours.”

“Thanks Booker?”

“Are you going to call your mom?”

“I can’t call; I snuck out.”

“You sure picked a nice night for it.”

Lacy curled up on the sofa and watched the fading storm. Booker flopped on the recliner and watched Lacy.

“How’d you find my place? You’ve never been here before.”

“I don’t know. I just knew.”

“That’s kind of spooky. Maybe the ghost of Kit Carson led you here.”

Lacy raised an eyebrow and said, “We should try and get some rest.” Pulling the blanket up around her ears, she shivered before closing her eyes.

Just before 6:30 that morning, the two teenagers stepped into the frosty Omaha dawn. They hopped in Booker’s ’83 F150, pulled out of the Sweet Water Creek Mobile Home Park, and headed north on Highway 680. The worst of the storm had passed, and

except for an occasional gust of wind, it was dead quite. Booker felt the edge of an uncomfortable silence.

“Are you sure everything is alright?”

“I don’t believe in God anymore,” she replied. “Isn’t that a horrible thing to say?”

“Not really.”

Lacy burst out laughing and slugged Booker in the arm. “You’re terrible.”

“I am terrible. Everyone says it.”

“Nobody says you’re terrible. Everyone says you’re nice.”

“You’ve been talking to the wrong people.”

“I don’t think so Booker. You know...we’ve been going to school together for a long time.”

“Since the third grade.”

“Why is it we never really talked before you got the job at the stables?”

“Because I’m terrible?”

“That must be it,” she said. “You know who’s really terrible? My stepfather Bill, he’s the worst. Bill can quote the Bible front to back, but he makes it all so ugly, I can’t stand to listen.”

Booker reached up and slipped the air freshener off the rearview mirror. The flat rectangle had a serene mountain lake and rainbow background with an inspirational message printed on it. He handed it to Lacy.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a Native American saying.”

Lacy said, “Give thanks for unknown blessings already on their way.” She hung the air-freshener back on the mirror. “I don’t get it. I mean I get it, but what does it have to do with me not believing in God anymore or the fact that my blowhard stepfather is a royal Christian hypocrite?”

“It’s really quite simple. I was on my way home from the Sioux City Science Fair when I found this unassuming little air-freshener at a truck stop. Earlier that day, I’d been to a lecture about sub-atomic particles. When I read the inspirational message, I thought it was like someone put a Bible into an atom smasher and shot a high-speed particle right into the very core.”

“That makes no sense Booker.”

“Permit me to postulate. A particle accelerator, or atom smasher, accelerates particles to high speeds and collides them with target atoms. The resulting pieces from the collision, as well as the emitted radiation, are detected and analyzed. The information tells scientists about the particles that make up the atom and the forces that hold the atom together. This air-freshener is like the sub-atomic Bible, really just the essence. Isn’t that what God is—*Unknown Blessings*? Have a little faith Lacy Kit Carson. Those blessings are on their way.”

“That’s nice Booker, strange...but nice. I’m still not sure I see the point?”

“I guess my point is as long as you have hope then you still believe in God. Even if you’re having a bad time and you’re mad and you say you don’t. And just because your stepfather is a jerk and he twists the Bible around to justify his behavior, that doesn’t make the Bible ugly. It sounds like he’s ugly, and he makes everything around him ugly too. That’s why I like my Native American air-freshener. There’s no way to twist it around or make it ugly. It’s a pure thought.”

“Maybe,” she said. “If there is a God, he’s really testing me. My loser stepfather is about to send me over the edge. He has my mother completely brainwashed, and she does anything he says like an obedient little slave. It makes sick; he makes me sick. Fatso stepped over the line last night. Can you believe that disgusting butterball told me he was going to meet a man at the stables early this morning and sell my horse?”

“No way. What a mutant.”

“So could we please go a little faster? I really need to get to the stables before Bill, so I can hide Creed.”

“Why didn’t you say so?”

Booker punched the gas pedal and the old Ford surged forward. He was cruising close to eighty when he spotted the State Trooper looking down the sights of a Radar Gun. Booker jerked his foot off the gas pedal and tapped on the brake, but it was too late. The Trooper locked in on Booker and signaled for him to pull over. While the Trooper wrote out the ticket, Booker could feel his wallet shrinking, and Lacy could feel Creed slipping away.

At the entrance to Diamond Stables, the heavy-gauge horse gate had been unlocked and was standing open. Booker slowed to a crawl and rolled down his window. The morning air was filled with the sound of a diesel engine idling not far away.

Lacy said, “Pull over here behind the trees.”

A thick row of American elm, at least a hundred yards wide, kept Diamond Stables secluded from the outside world. Booker parked along the trees, and the two teenagers slipped out of the truck. They trudged through the mud and stopped at the entrance. Two hundred feet straight ahead, the main office door was open. Bill came storming out and walked across the drive toward a Freightliner hauling a horse trailer. Parked along the corral fence, the truck faced the tack-room. The teenagers used the backside of the corral for cover, working their way around to a spot over by the tack-room, out of sight, but still close enough to hear what the two men were saying. The driver shut off the engine and climbed down out of the truck. Lacy signaled Booker to be quiet while she listened to the driver complaining about the delay.

She whispered, “I need you to keep those two busy. If Bill sees me, he’ll know something is up. All you have to do is hold their attention, and keep them distracted while I make a break for Creed. Once I get a bridle on him, we’ll make a run for it.”

“What’s your stepfather going to do? I don’t want to make him mad. He looks mean.”

“I really need your help Booker,” she said, fluttering her eyes. “I’m a damsel in distress. I need a knight in shining armor?”

Helpless, Booker slapped himself in the forehead. Against his better judgment, he walked over to the tack-room, rolled the tumblers on the padlock, and popped open the door. Grabbing a pick and shovel, he strolled to a spot a few feet in front of the truck. Booker took huge shovels full of mud and started dumping them in a big pile right under the Freightliner’s front bumper. It wasn’t long before Bill took notice.

“What in the Sam Hill do you think you’re doing boy?”

“I’m measuring the effects of moisture on soil compaction.”

“How’d you like me to compact your face?” Bill asked. “What’s the matter with you boy? Are you some kind of retard? You’re digging a hole right in front of this man’s truck you damn dimwit.”

“I’m not a dimwit.”

“Well you’re sure acting like one. You’d be smart to do you’re digging somewhere else boy. You don’t want to piss me off youngster, not this early in the morning.”

Stunned by Bill’s crassness, Booker’s jaw dropped, and he stood frozen with his mouth open.

“Now about that hundred dollars,” Bill said, turning back to the old driver. “I’ll sign the Bill-of-Sale, and the horse is yours. That office manager won’t give you any trouble. I got her straightened out. She’s just some ignorant Mexican woman from a temporary employment agency. She’s going to open the stall right after she finds the keys.” Bill pointed to the far end of the stables. “See, there she is. She’s headed down there right now. Give me my money. There’s no need for me to stick around. This place smells like horseshit, and besides, it’s colder than a well-diggers ass out here. Just give me the cash, so I can be on my way.”

The driver paid up, and Bill signed the paperwork. Bill started walking toward his car, and Booker approached the driver.

“Excuse me sir. I was curious. Why do you need a forty-foot trailer for just one horse?”

The trucker spun around and bore into Booker with bloodshot eyes. The old driver had a bad case of white line fever, and his face had a million miles on it. He scratched his coarse gray stubble and chewed tobacco while he talked.

“Hell son, this is only my first stop. I’m going to pick up about twenty more head in Grand Junction. After that, I’ll head to Holbrook Arizona. That ought to give me a full load.” The old driver climbed up in the cabover Freightliner and looked out the window. “From there, I take ‘em on down to Mexico to the Slaughterhouse.”

The diesel engine roared to life, and Lacy burst from her hiding place. She looked at Booker with flaming blue eyes and cried, “Stop that truck.”

“Stop!” Booker grabbed the handrail and climbed up by the driver’s window. “What if I told you I’d give you a hundred and forty dollars for that horse you just bought? I know you only paid a hundred for it. I’ve got a hundred forty dollars at home, and I’ll give you every penny of it. That’s a forty percent profit in less than five minutes. That’s a super deal mister. You can’t pass that up.”

“Boy, I can get four-hundred dollars for that horse down in Mexico. You got that much money?” When Booker didn’t answer, the old driver shook his head. “I didn’t think so. Now get down off this truck boy. I got man’s work to do.”

While Booker had been stalling the driver, Lacy had reached between the truck and trailer, pushed the safety latch out of the way, and grabbed the steel handle of the trailer release bar. Yanking on the handle, she pulled the release bar open and then ran for Creed. Once Lacy was clear, Booker got down off the Freightliner and started backing up fast.

The driver shove the truck in gear, the truck rolled forward, and the kingpin slipped from its cradle. The trailer slid off the greasy fifth-wheel plate, and the aluminum horse hauler crashed down on the truck’s steel frame. The sound shattered the morning air. The

driver slammed on the brakes, but the tires slid in the mud, and the trailer slipped off the back of the truck. The empty horse trailer plopped in the muck and shuddered.

The old driver exploded out of the cab. Shaking while he lit a smoke, he took a couple of real good pulls on the nicotine stick before flipping open his cell phone and calling the police. Ranting at the 911 Operator, the driver accused the teenagers of malicious mayhem and told the operator that the cops had better hurry up because one of the little hellions was getting away. He hung up and lit another smoke off the smoldering butt shaking between his fingers.

He said, "I just called the cops. I don't know what the hell's going on around here, but you and that little girl down there are going to have to answer some questions. That damn trailer didn't come loose by itself."

After she'd scared off the office manager, Lacy had put a bridle on Creed and was headed for the door when a black and white radio unit pulled up, blocking the stall exit. Officer Gil Larson, an eight-year veteran, rolled out of the squad car and straightened his rumpled uniform. Larson's plump round face was pink in the cold morning air, and his gray wool tundra cap gave him the look of a Norseman. His stride was easy as he stepped into the stall with Lacy. Officer Larson had a patriarchal presence, sympathetic eyes, and a warm tone.

"Whoa," he said, stroking the startled quarter horse's forehead and muzzle. He looked at Lacy with disbelieving eyes and started laughing. "Did you really disconnect that old man's trailer?"

"You don't understand. I had to. Please let me go. I'll never do anything wrong again for the rest of my life."

"Do me a favor little girl and come down off that horse so we can talk."

"Please don't arrest me."

"I don't arrest people," he replied. "Not unless I absolutely have to. It's not my job to arrest people. My job is conflict resolution. Now why don't you dismount and let's see if we can't figure this mess out. Okay sweetheart?"

Lacy leaned over, buried her face in Creed's mane, and started to cry. Rolling off of her horse, her legs gave way, and her butt hit the stable floor. When she got her composure back, she pulled herself up. Except for the part about Booker being involved, Lacy told Officer Larson everything.

While Lacy told her story, Larson thought about what would happen to his ten-year-old daughter if he died. Lacy finished with a sigh, and the policeman took her by the hand. Leading her over to the tack-room, he had Lacy stand with Booker and then motioned for the driver to follow him while he inspected the horse trailer.

"It looks like you got lucky," Larson said to the driver.

"In a pig's eye," he replied.

"Can the attitude," Larson said. "Except for a couple of minor scratches, there's no damage to the trailer. I guess all the mud made for a nice soft landing. There's no visible damage to the landing gear. Even the airlines are still connected. Everything looks fine. I'll bet you could use that backhoe over by the barn to lift the trailer out of the mud. Then you can lower the landing gear, hook-up your rig, and be on your way."

"What kind of cop are you anyway? Aren't you going to arrest these two little gangbangers?"

“I thought about arresting you,” Larson said. “The girl claims you were trying to steal her horse.”

“That lying little bitch,” he said. “I’ve got a bill of sale right here. That’s my horse, and those two little pricks ought to be horsewhipped for that stunt they pulled. I want them arrested.”

“Are you sure about that?” Larson asked. “If I arrest them, then this becomes a crimes scene, and the horse becomes evidence. Arresting them would force me to impound the horse until a judge could make a decision.”

“This is bullshit.”

“Watch your mouth,” Larson said. “Or I’ll seize your truck and trailer too. It’s all evidence.”

Booker blurted out, “I’ll buy Creed. He only paid a hundred bucks for him. I’ll buy Creed back for one hundred forty dollars. That’s a forty percent profit in ten minutes. And I’ll pick up his trailer with the backhoe, so he can get back on the road.”

“That sounds fair to me,” Larson said, turning toward Lacy. “How do you feel about that Lacy?”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Say yes,” Booker said. “Creed will still be your horse. I’ll keep him at the stables and take care of him until you can get a job and pay me back.”

“That’s so sweet Booker.”

“You’ve got two choices,” Lawson said, turning back to the driver. “Take the young man’s generous offer, or sit around waiting for a judge to rule. Property cases are a low priority, so it might take a month or more.”

“What the hell is this? Is this some kind of shakedown? Is this what passes for law in Nebraska?”

“Law’s got nothing to do with it; this is about justice. I call it Prairie Justice.”

Larson’s face contorted, and he looked like an agitated bulldog as he eyeballed the old driver. The old man flinched, and Larson growled. “I’d suggest you take the boys offer. Then head for the Stateline.”

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