

**Text Message Exchange
Between Jordyn Petit and Violet Crow
Sunday, April 15, 2018**

Jordyn:
Going 2 Coras at

Violet:
Me too. Are you going to bring it?

Jordyn:
Yeah

Violet:
R we really doing this????

Jordyn:
Yes! Unless UR 2 scared

Violet:
What if we get caught?

Just keep your mouth
shut and we won't

Monday, April 16, 2018

12:45 a.m.

The air is cold, but she barely notices. It's the dark that fills her chest with terror, makes her limbs heavy with dread. But she feels something else, too. Something that she can't quite name. It reminds her of how she feels the night before her birthday or on Christmas Eve but not exactly the same. Thinking about her birthday and Christmas makes her feel good, warm. This feels more like slowly climbing the ladder to the high dive at the swimming pool or like when the roller coaster at Adventureland reaches its highest peak just before it plunges straight down and she just knows she is going to die.

The train yard, filled with the carcasses of gutted-out buildings, is only illuminated by a wispy, wayward eyelash of a pale moon. She stretches out her neck, tilting her ear toward the tracks, hoping to get a sense as to where the others have gone but all she can hear is the wind whispering through the tall grass.

Too much time has passed. They may already be looking for them. It's now or never, she thinks nervously. She can do this, if she doesn't he'll never show up. That was the deal. Together in the bedroom, door locked, they planned everything so carefully right down to the day and hour.

In her right hand dangles the hawk-billed knife they secreted from a kitchen drawer. Her other arm hangs loosely at her side. At first they considered bringing a crowbar but decided that it was too big, too heavy to lift. This fits her fingers better, feels comfortable, reassuring in her palm. She will use it if she has to.

Over the past month or so he's written messages, love letters, really. Sweet, sentimental words that if she could, she would tuck inside her secret shoebox filled with lucky coins and heart-shaped rocks found over the years. But he warned her, said they could get in trouble, so instead she memorizes each sentence and

murmurs them at night before she falls asleep and it's almost as if he's right there with her.

She picks up her pace and moves toward the tracks, dulled and worn down by time and elements. The rail ties are barely visible through the weeds, half-buried sun-bleached bones. She's breathing hard and suddenly realizes tears are rolling down her cheeks. On the opposite side of the tracks where the last year's winter wheat stands, unsown and bent like a wizened old man, is a field that in a few months will be filled with alfalfa. There she sees something. He is hidden in the shadows but she knows it's him. He's come. He beckons her with a raised hand and her heart leaps.

Out of the corner of her eye she sees a familiar shape sitting on the train tracks, knees tucked beneath her chin. The girl turns her head as she approaches, stretches out her legs, holds her injured arm close to her side. They don't speak. She trusts her. Of course she does.

The figure in the dry grass tilts his chin as if to say, *Go ahead. Do it. I dare you.* Her legs are not her own as she approaches, the knife bouncing lightly against her thigh. She stops in front of the girl who stands and smiles crookedly up at her through tears, her small teeth flashing white. Beneath her feet the ground vibrates, warning her of the coming train. She has to hurry; once the engine comes into view it will be too late. He'll leave.

In the distance a dog barks. The rumble of the train grows louder.

She strikes quickly, without thinking. The cold metal rips through fabric and skin easily. She thought it would be harder, take more effort. The girl looks at her in confusion, presses her fingers to her abdomen and pulls them away. The girl looks surprised to find them wet with blood.

The tracks shiver and shake with the approaching engine. The girl tries to squirm away but she yanks her backward and the slick knife slides through her fingers and to the ground; she

slams the girl's head onto the track, the rusty bolts tearing at the girl's cheek, the delicate skin below her eye. Again and again she thrusts the girl's head down until her muscles burn and the girl goes limp. She considers leaving her on the tracks but in a burst of adrenaline she pushes the girl off the rails.

As she breathes deeply, her eyes search for him but he's gone. He's slipped back into the tall grass. He can't leave her behind. He promised. A wail from deep inside tries to find its way out but she finds she can't make a sound.

The freight train bears down on her with a long mournful cry and she considers staying still, allowing the engine to pull her beneath its iron wheels, but somehow her legs carry her over the tracks. She sees herself pushing through the plumes of winter wheat, painting them red as she brushes by, and finally catches sight of him. He pauses and turns to face her. He looks pleased.

Case #92-10945

Excerpt from the journal of Cora E. Landry

Sept 5, 2017

Today was my first official day of sixth grade and it actually went really well! Middle school is a lot bigger than my elementary school because three dinky towns have to share the building. For once I'm going to school with kids I haven't been with since preschool.

The good news is I don't have any classes with Melody Jenkins, who was awful to me during fifth grade. She's the one who sent the top four lists all around school. I was at the top of each one. Dumbest, ugliest, weirdest, most likely to be a virgin. That last one is just stupid. I tried to not let it bother me but it did. And I only have lunch and one class with Jordyn Petit. Jordyn isn't as bad as Melody but last year she did tell everyone that I liked Dakota Richter. NOT true!

The best news is that I have lunch and social studies with Gabe Shannon, who I've liked forever and I think he might actually like me, too. This summer I helped my mom in the elementary school office where she's the secretary and Gabe helped his mom set up her kindergarten classroom for the new school year. We hung out a bunch this summer and really got to know each other.

Anyway, I've got social studies with Mr. Dover, who is cute and is supposed to be a really fun teacher, and I'm even thinking about going out for volleyball. My mom says that it's really important to be "a joiner" in middle school in order to discover what I like to do and to meet some new people.

My sister, Kendall, says that this is Mom's way of saying, Don't be a loser, Cora. If you don't make some friends now, you never will. I think that Kend-all is probably right. She's super popular and pretty and outgoing. I mean, I'm not a monster, but I'm definitely not as good-looking as Kendall. I'm pretty much her complete opposite.

The good thing is in middle school everyone who goes out for a sport is on the team. They don't cut anyone, which is a huge relief because I know I'm going to be terrible at volleyball. My only other option is joining the cross-country team and I can't think of anything worse than running on purpose. So volleyball, it is. The first practice is tomorrow. Wish me luck—I'm going to need it!

Beth Crow

Monday, April 16, 2018

I've been called a lot of things in my thirty-six years: trash, slut, home wrecker. And much worse. All true, I guess, if I'm being completely honest with myself. But one thing I won't let people get away with saying about me is that I'm a bad mother. Those are fighting words. Just about everything I've ever done has been for my two children. I may be stupid when it comes to men but I'm a good mother.

Seven months ago I quit my job as an administrative assistant at an office supply company, loaded our belongings and squeezed a reluctant Violet, a pissed-off Max and Boomer, our basset hound, into our car that was more rust than steel and began the twenty-five-hour drive northeast from Algodon, New Mexico, to Green Bay. The plan was to begin a new life with my boyfriend, Jerry, who moved there to take a job with Proc-tor & Gamble a few months earlier.

I had some hard selling to do but by the time we reached Kansas City I almost had them convinced that even though we would be giving up Picacho Peak we would get Lambeau Field and the Green Bay Packers. And though we were trading in the Rio Grande there would be Lake Michigan where we could go fishing and water skiing. And though we would miss driving through the Mesilla Valley and seeing the fields of cotton, white, fluffy and soothing against the dusty, dry ground, once in Wisconsin we would have piles of crisp clean snow to build snowmen and have snowball fights.

Max wasn't buying it but Violet was easier to convince. Always in her own little world, Violet would retreat into her notebook of drawings and stories and a few hours later she'd look up, blinking rapidly as if trying to bring her surroundings back into focus. Max, on the other hand, wanted nothing to do with the

move. He was completely content in New Mexico and didn't even try to hide his hate for Jerry. It's to Max's credit that he didn't say *I told you so* when the car broke down in the middle of Iowa and Jerry suddenly had a change of heart and got back together with his ex-wife.

Long story short, we stayed in Pitch, a dying railroad town with a population of about two thousand. We were rescued by a nice lady by the name of Tess Petit, who has a granddaughter the same age as Violet.

I know I should answer the phone but for the first time in almost a year a man is beneath me and inside me. Our fingers intertwine and we move as one person. The phone rings and rings and I briefly think of my kids. Violet is spending the night at Cora's house and Max, I hope, is fast asleep downstairs. Usually Boomer alerts me to the comings and goings of my kids but I have been a bit distracted for the past hour or so. Sam reaches out and cups my face in his palm, his fingers pressing into my cheek, keeping my eyes on his, and I push any thought of my children aside.

Finally, my heart stops galloping and Sam presses his face to my neck, his beard velvety against my skin, and I remember the ringing phone. It's late. Or early, depending on how you look at it—1:00 a.m. Way too late for any good news.

"Don't worry, they'll call back if it's important," Sam murmurs in my ear, reading my mind. We doze. Then that voice, that good mother voice that I so pride myself on having says, *Get dressed, you don't want Max or Violet to see you like this.* But instead I move closer to Sam all the while thinking it's been so long since someone has held me like this.

It isn't Max or Violet or the telephone that wakes us up, it's the sirens. At first a single alarm whoops off in the distance and then is joined by several more. I scramble from the bed, pulling the sheets around me, and run to the window and crane my neck to the left and the right, hoping to catch sight of the

emergency lights. No such luck. No streetlights line our road and the houses across the street are still dark.

“Max,” I breathe, somehow sure that the sirens are for him. That he has been in a car accident or is out doing something stupid—hanging out on the train tracks, drinking with friends. “Max!” I shout as I quickly throw on the clothes I wore earlier. “Max!”

I move through Violet’s side of the bedroom that we separate with one of those room partitions. On my side of the partition I have pictures of Max and Violet and an old one of my parents. On Violet’s side are a few hand-drawn pictures of unicorns and fairies and landscape sketches of the railroad tracks west of town.

I rush down the steps and to the family room. Max’s bedroom door is open and I slap at the light switch on the wall. His bed is unmade, but that doesn’t mean anything; he rarely makes it, anyway. I turn and push through a second door, the bathroom—empty—and a third door that leads to our narrow galley kitchen, also empty except for a few dirty plates and silverware in the sink. Max has been here between the time I snuck Sam up into my bedroom and now.

“Try and call him,” Sam says, coming up behind me and laying a hand on my shoulder. His fingers feel like lead weights and I shrug them away. I suddenly want him out of my house. Gone.

The sound of sirens fades and I allow myself a moment of hope. Pitch is tiny. Too little to have emergency services like a hospital or ambulance or a fire station. For these we rely on Oskaloosa to the south of us or the city of Grayling, about a half an hour northeast of Pitch. We do have a police department that consists of a chief, one full-time and two part-time officers.

I run back upstairs and fumble around for my cell phone and finally find it on the floor next to the bed. I call Max’s phone and it rings and rings until it goes to voice mail. Behind me I’m aware of Sam pulling on his shoes.

“No answer,” I say. I’m trying not to panic. This isn’t the first

time Max hasn't come home by his midnight curfew. I was hoping that this rural Iowa town might be good for him after Algodon where he had fallen in with a rough group—drinking, smoking and God knows what else. But I guess even Pitch has its share of wild teenagers. So now I get to worry about him being out at all hours of the night, raising hell in a cornfield or on the railroad tracks instead of in the mountains. Same problems—new setting.

“He’s probably just at a friend’s house,” Sam says, pulling a sweatshirt over his head. I nod, wanting it to be true. “Do you have a picture of him? I can drive around, see if I can find him.”

“No, no, that’s okay,” I tell him. “I know the places he goes.” This is not entirely true. I know that Max hangs around with a boy named Clint, who either wears the same camo pants every day or owns a pair for each day of the week. Clint, when he comes over to the house, won’t look at me and answers questions in the fewest amount of words possible. He has close-set, ferrety eyes and always has a pissed-off look on his face. I don’t know much about his family except that he lives in a trailer east of town with his mom and two brothers.

“Do you want me to stay here, then? Wait and see if he comes back?”

There’s no way that I’m going to leave this man alone in my home. “I think it’s best if you just go,” I tell him. “I’ll go and look for him myself. Thanks, though.”

“Let me drive you around, then,” Sam says, looking at me as if he really wants to help. “You can keep trying to reach him while I drive.”

He has a point. Though Pitch is just a speck on the map, I’m not so familiar with all the back roads.

My thoughts turn to a girl that Max doesn’t know I’m aware of. “There’s a girl,” I say. “I think she lives out near the fairgrounds.” I think her name is Nikki. She’s pretty in a too-much makeup, overplucked-eyebrow sort of way. She comes into the

convenience store where I work several times a week—Pitch Fuel and Feed. Seriously, that's its name. She nearly always buys the same things: a can of Red Bull, cinnamon-flavored gum and a pack of powdered-sugar donuts. Sometimes she comes in by herself and sometimes she comes in with a girl of about five who has Down syndrome. I assume she's Nikki's sister.

Nikki always waits patiently while the younger girl wanders the aisles with a dollar bill clutched in her hand. She doesn't roll her eyes or heave big sighs when her sister chooses a pack of gummy worms, puts it back and then reaches for a bag of potato chips. The sister does this three or four times with different snacks and eventually always settles on the gummy worms. Nikki just waits, absentmindedly spinning the metal rack that holds everything from key chains to sunglasses. When her sister finally makes her decision, they lay their purchases on the counter and I ring them up.

I want so badly for Max to talk to me about Nikki but whenever I ask him about his friends he just says that everyone in Pitch is stupid. I try not to push it, afraid that if I do he will stop talking to me altogether.

Sam pulls open the front door for me and waits by my side as I debate whether or not to lock it. Max has a key but Violet didn't bring hers to the overnight. "It will be fine," Sam says. "You'll probably only be gone for thirty minutes, tops. Your daughter's got a phone, right?"

"Yeah, but I better leave a note," I tell him and then dash back inside and scrawl a few words on the back of an envelope. *Violet, went looking for Max. Lock the door behind you if you get home before we do. Mom.*

Outside I find Sam sitting in his car, the engine idling. My car—not the one that we arrived with in Pitch, but one with fewer miles and fewer dents—is parked in the driveway just in front of Sam's SUV. The night air is chilly and I wish I would

have thought to grab a sweatshirt. I climb in next to Sam, who, seeing me shiver, cranks the heater to the highest setting.

“Where to?” he asks. Though I’m grateful for the ride, for his willingness to come along with me on this trek, a persistent voice in my head is telling me to get out of his car and into my own.

“Let’s check his friend Clint’s house first,” I say. “He lives out on Highway 162 about four miles.” Sam backs out of the gravel driveway before stopping in the middle of the street.

“Or,” Sam says, sliding his eyes toward me, “we can follow the sirens. Might put your mind at ease.”

His suggestion makes sense. We can drive all around the county and not come across Max, but if we go toward where we think the emergency vehicles went, then I’d know for sure that Max is safe. Or not.

“West, I think,” I say and Sam throws the car into gear and tears off toward the railroad tracks that split Pitch in half. No one can say that one side of Pitch is any better than the other. The north side has the Lutheran church, the library and the Fuel and Feed while the south side has the Catholic church, the middle school and the old opera house. Both ends of town have their share of foreclosed homes.

Sam turns onto Main Street and I tap my foot nervously as we pass the hardware store and an antique shop with a vintage soda machine sitting out front. He reaches for my hand and I pull it away to cover up a fake cough.

I should never have invited him over. Though tonight was our first official date, Sam and I have spent time together. He comes into the Fuel and Feed twice a week—the first on his way to see his parents and the second on his way back home. He buys a cup of coffee or a pack of sunflower seeds and we talk.

He learned that after coming to town, instead of fixing my car and heading on to Green Bay, I got a job at the convenience store, rented a two-bedroom house with peeling paint, no air-conditioning and a temperamental furnace and enrolled my kids

in school. I learned that he grew up in Pitch, now lives forty miles away in North Liberty and works as a researcher in the College of Dentistry at the University of Grayling.

Tonight, with Max out with friends and Violet spending the night at Cora's, Sam and I drove to Washington to eat at an Italian place he knew about, and after one too many glasses of wine, we ended up in bed together. Big mistake. But big fun.

We glide past the post office and two empty storefronts with soaped-out windows and past Petit's Bar and Grill. The closer we get to the railroad tracks, the faster my foot taps against the rubber floor mat. I want to tell Sam to turn around, to go back to the house. Max has been out all night before, shown up in the wee hours, bleary-eyed and rumpled and probably hungover, but he always comes home.

I'm afraid of what I might find once we reach the police cars or ambulances. I strain to see if I can hear the sirens, even roll down the window, but all I can hear is the rumble of the car's engine and the creak of branches rubbing against each other as we drive down Main.

Sam slows to crawl as he crosses the railroad tracks but still the car bounces and pitches as it rolls over the uneven iron rails. I expect Sam to make a left on Depot, a street that runs parallel to the tracks, but he keeps going. Once over the tracks we pass the bank and the tiny grocery store, and then three blocks filled with single-family homes.

I glance down Juneberry, the street where Violet is spending the night at her best friend's house. Cora Landry invited Violet over so they could spend their free day off school together tomorrow. I breathe a sigh of relief. No ambulances down that way.

Pitch ends suddenly as if the town's forefathers somehow knew that it would never really grow into the buzzing railroad town originally planned. Main Street turns into a country highway, treeless and lined with deep ditches and acres of farmland now hidden by the black night. The road dips and winds and grad-

ually rises and I turn in my seat to look out the rear window. From here I can see Pitch below us.

“There,” I say, grabbing at Sam’s arm. On the western edge of Pitch right along the railroad tracks and the old millwork district I see the rhythmic swirling of red lights. Sam knew exactly what he was doing coming up here.

Without slowing down, he makes a U-turn and I clutch at the dash to keep myself from sliding across the seat. There is no train in sight. Surely if there was an accident with one of the freight trains that runs through Pitch four times a day, it would have stopped. Unless, of course, the engineer didn’t know that he hit someone. Sam pulls off to the side of the road and punches the hazards with one finger.

“Try and call Max again,” he says and I lift the phone to my ear and this time it goes right to voice mail. “Do you want to go down there?” he asks.

Apprehension, thick as mud, fills my chest. I’ve always known I would never have much money, never have a big house to live in, never have some great job, probably never get married again. And because I’ve expected so little I don’t think I’m asking too much that my kids stay safe. God and I have always had a complicated relationship, but I never held anything against Him. But if something bad happened to Max or Violet all bets are off. I don’t want to find out what’s going on down there. I will my phone to vibrate, but it stays still.

“Go,” I finally say. I’m guessing that we won’t get very close to the scene, anyway, but I have to do whatever I can to find out what’s going on. Sam pulls back onto the highway and he speeds toward the train yard. He doesn’t have to worry about getting pulled over. It looks like every police officer and sheriff’s deputy in Johnson County is parked down there.

In less than three minutes Sam manages to park just a block away from where all the emergency vehicles have converged. Two sheriff’s cars and the police chief’s SUV barricade the only

entrance into the train yard where the depot is boarded up and empty boxcars, abandoned years ago, sit. An ambulance is parked a bit off to the side facing the road ready to leave in a hurry. A deputy strides toward us as we approach. He's young. Tall and broad across the shoulders. His eyes dart left and right as if on the lookout for something or someone. He looks scared. Ill.

"You can't be here, folks," he says, trying to usher us back toward the car.

"We heard the sirens, saw the lights," Sam explains. "What happened? Is everyone okay?"

"Sorry, you can't be here," the officer says again. Behind him someone turns on their headlights and the darkened train yard suddenly comes into view to reveal a flurry of activity. A woman wearing running tights and tennis shoes is talking to another officer. With hands tucked inside the sleeves of her sweatshirt she gestures toward the tracks and then rubs at her eyes, leaving behind a streak of red across her face.

"Is that blood?" I ask louder than I intend. Hearing me, the woman looks down at her hands and cries out.

"Ma'am," the young officer says more sternly, "you need to leave this area." This is when I see the EMTs come toward us carrying a stretcher to the ambulance. A small body is strapped securely to the stretcher. My breath lodges in my throat. She is shaped like my Violet. Thin with long dark hair that could belong to Violet, too, but the child's face is nearly unrecognizable. Bloody, swollen, grotesque.

I try to push past the officer but he steps in front of me and I bounce against his solid form and stumble backward. Sam is quicker than I am and skirts past the cop to get a better look.

"It's okay, I don't think it's Violet," he calls back to me.

"Are you sure?" I say, wanting so badly to believe him, but Sam hasn't met my kids yet—how would he know?

"What color is Violet's hair?" he asks.

"Black." My heart pounds wildly.

“Then it’s not her. This girl has lighter hair.” I want to cry in relief.

From my spot on the hard-packed dirt I can now see it isn’t Violet. The girl’s ears do not belong to my daughter. The hair I thought at first glance was Violet’s isn’t naturally dark but slick and blackened with blood. This child looks a bit thinner than Violet. Still...there is something familiar about her, but it can’t be. It doesn’t make sense.

Sam comes back to my side and helps me to my feet. My stomach churns. What has happened to this little girl? What could cause this kind of damage? Not a car accident; there are no other vehicles besides the ambulance and the police cars. A fall from a bike? She’s deathly still and I wonder if she’s breathing. She looks like she could have been mauled by a dog or some other large animal. A flap of skin hangs loosely from her cheek and blood bubbles from her lips.

The EMTs lift her into the ambulance and are quickly on their way and the scream of the siren once again shatters the late-night quiet. I watch as it speeds away, the tires kicking up clouds of dust, and wonder how they are going to find out who the injured girl is. I’m just getting ready to ask the cop this question when I realize that everyone else is looking back toward the railroad tracks.

Another small silhouette appears. This time on foot, emerging from the tall winter wheat that fills the field on just the other side of the tracks.

Again my heart nearly stops.

It’s Violet.

She is moving toward us as if in slow motion. Eyes unfocused, unseeing. The front of her white T-shirt blooms red. Her hands look like they’ve been steeped in blood. Something tumbles from her fingers and lands on the dirt at her feet.

“Oh, my God,” I breathe. “She’s bleeding! Call another ambulance!”

It feels like forever until I finally reach her. I sweep her up in my arms and run my eyes over her, searching for the source of all the blood. “Help her!” I cry, laying her gently on the ground. “Please,” I plead. “What happened?” I ask Violet. “Who did this?”

Suddenly I know exactly who the other girl is. Violet’s best friend, Cora Landry. I feel arms pulling me backward and hear Sam telling me to let them do their work. Violet’s lips move but I can’t quite make out what she says.