

18 hours  
To US

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# I All His Fault

*I hate yellow cars.*

These were the words that crossed Natalie's mind that Saturday in early May as a glimpse of yellow bumper peeked out from behind the trees at the crossroad ahead. The bright morning sun glared off its windshield as it came into full view and stopped, but she didn't need to see inside to know who was sitting behind the wheel.

Colton Daynes.

You couldn't miss him in that shiny yellow Chevy Camaro with the black stripes that his daddy bought him when he turned sixteen. Colton, with his honey-brown hair and stunning green eyes and a body like one of those statues on display in a piazza in Italy. Not that she'd ever been. Italy was the vacation of her dreams. And Colton's presence had graced more than a few of her dreams as well.

As Natalie rapidly approached in her little grey Honda Accord, the yellow car inched forward from its place to her left. Only, it kept moving.

*He's not actually pulling out right now, is he?*

The wheels of Colton's Camaro suddenly squealed as he made a go of it, turning out in front of her. Panic shot through her body, and she gripped tightly to the steering wheel. If he had gone just five seconds sooner and if she had been driving just a little slower, she might have had time to stop properly. Instead, she was forced to swerve right to avoid him as she stomped on the brake, glancing in her rearview mirror at the car traveling not so far behind. Her biggest concern in that instant was not whether that car would hit her or even if she would strike the car waiting on the opposite side of the intersection, but how embarrassing it would be to smash up Colton's nice car.

Natalie braced herself for impact and squeezed her eyes shut with a prayer on her lips. The crack of her car striking another was a sound she wouldn't soon forget. The seat belt locked and airbag deployed as her body jerked forward, and just as quickly as all that, she was slammed backward into her seat again, her head smacking the head rest. The squealing tires of the car behind her caused her to squeeze her eyes tighter in anticipation of another collision, but it never came.

She slowly opened her eyes and looked ahead to see the brake lights of Colton's untouched car on the side of the road. The lights turned white as his car began moving in reverse. She took a deep breath and looked over at the driver of the car she had hit, who was surveying the damage to his car and running his fingers through his hair. He

spoke into his cell phone—no doubt on the line with 911—and a scowl appeared on his face when he saw Colton walking toward their vehicles.

Colton headed straight for the driver side of Natalie’s car and opened her door.

Natalie heard a woman’s voice behind her asking for an ambulance at their location. “Yes, there’s been an accident.”

“Are you hurt?” Colton asked her.

Stunned and shaking, she couldn’t form a response. *Was she hurt?* She moved her legs, wiggled her feet, stretched her arms, felt the back of her head. Everything seemed to be working properly. Nothing felt broken. She wasn’t bleeding. But when she turned her head toward the woman, she winced at a stab of pain in her neck.

“Are you hurt?” Colton repeated, leaning in closer.

“I ... I think I’m OK,” Natalie finally replied.

“She says she’s OK,” he told the woman.

“Police and paramedics are on their way,” the woman said.

The man with the smashed up car began ripping into Colton then.

“What were you thinking?” he cried. “You could’ve killed someone.”

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry, sir,” Colton repeated over and over again as the man continued his reprimand.

“Stupid teenage driver.”

Natalie had never thought of Colton as a particularly respectful sort of guy, but she was glad he didn’t make things worse in this situation. He deserved everything he got, though. What *could* he have been thinking, pulling out in front of her like that?

When she moved to get out of the car, Colton was by her side in a millisecond.

“Maybe you should stay put until the paramedics get here.” He looked down the road as the faint sound of sirens came into earshot.

“The bus,” Natalie managed in a whisper.

Colton leaned closer. “What’s that?”

“We’re going to miss the bus.”

A look of surprise crossed his face. “You go to my school?”

She felt the urge to smack him across that handsome face of his. They had been in the same class since kindergarten. They were even “boyfriend and girlfriend” in the first grade. How could he not know who she was?

“If I miss that bus, my parents are going to kill me.” She had been looking forward to the senior class trip to Virginia Beach the entire year, but the trip wasn’t cheap. She had saved up last summer, worked an after school job all year, and her parents had scrimped to pay the difference so she could go. Tears burned her eyes at the thought of all that money being lost.

Colton pulled the iPhone from his pocket and glanced at the time. “If we make a run

for it, we can probably still catch it.”

She stared at him in disbelief. “We can’t leave the scene of an accident.”

He grumbled something under his breath just as a police officer arrived on the scene.

Natalie found her purse on the floor of the passenger side and retrieved her phone. She really didn’t want to call her dad, but she knew she had to. She hadn’t even stepped outside of the car yet to see what kind of damage had been done, but he wasn’t going to be happy. About any of this. Especially after the speeding ticket she’d been issued last month. Even though this was absolutely not her fault, she knew she was going to be in a lot of trouble.

The phone rang several times before her dad picked up.

“Did you miss the bus, Granny?” He always teased her for driving slow like a little old grandma.

“Not yet, but I probably will. I got in an accident.”

“Natty, no.”

“Someone pulled out in front of me, and I had to swerve. I hit another car.”

“Are you all right?” Worry was apparent in his voice.

Natalie’s head was throbbing, but she was afraid if she admitted it, he would make her stay home. “I’m fine.”

The ambulance sirens drowned out whatever her dad said next.

“What?” she asked.

“Are you really fine or are you just saying that so you can still go?”

He knew her so well. “The paramedics are here now, and they’ll tell you exactly what I told you. I’m fine.”

“Where are you?”

She gave him her location and waited for an EMT to examine her.

It was a relief that her dad and not her stepmother had answered the phone. It wasn’t that Norma was a horrible person, really, but she had a tendency to fly off the handle over everything, especially things that inconvenienced her. She wasn’t exactly sure what her calm, levelheaded father saw in that high-strung, scatterbrained woman.

The EMTs checked her over and found her to be uninjured, except for a case of whiplash. They also informed her about concussions and what to pay attention for.

Colton stood near his car, answering the police officer’s questions, when Natalie’s dad and stepmom arrived.

Norma rushed over and pushed Natalie’s smooth, brown hair back, checking her face, her head, her arms.

“I’m fine, Norma.” She waved her stepmother away and pointed to one of the EMTs. “Ask him. He’ll tell you.”

The EMT nodded and gave them a thumbs-up.

“Oh, thank you, God.” Norma tucked a piece of strawberry blonde hair behind her ear. “We were so worried about you.” She hugged Natalie gently, as if she might break.

“Yes, we were.” Her father joined them then and grabbed hold of his girl, wrapping her up in a tight hug. When he let go, he took her face in his hands. “No parent wants to get a call like that. Ever.”

“I’m sorry, Dad.” Looking into his pale blue eyes was like looking into a mirror.

His gaze shifted to Colton, who was now standing near the front of Natalie’s car. “It wasn’t *your* fault.” He let go of her face and moved in Colton’s direction.

Natalie mentally prepared herself to be mortified by her dad confronting Colton. Instead, he walked over to the driver of the car she had hit to exchange phone numbers and insurance information. She was sure he wanted to rip into Colton, just as that driver had, but he kept his cool.

“I’m missing the bus,” Natalie said when he returned. “They were supposed to leave at nine o’clock.” The time on her phone showed 9:07 A.M.

He rubbed the back of his neck the way he always did when he was trying to find the solution to a problem. “Norma will take you to the school, and I’ll worry about your car,” he replied as he inspected the damage.

Natalie looked at Norma and could immediately tell by her expression that this was going to put a crimp in her plans.

“I can take her,” Colton piped in. “If we go now, we can probably still make the bus. They never leave on time for trips like this.”

Dad’s eyes narrowed. “You think I’m going to let my daughter in a car with you after this?”

“I’m so sorry, sir. I misjudged the distance because the sun was shining in my eyes. But, sir, I’ve never been in another accident ever. Never had a speeding ticket. I’ve never even had a parking ticket.” Colton looked at Natalie then back at her dad. “It’s the least I can do.”

“Please, Dad. It’s only, like, ten minutes from here.”

Dad rubbed his neck again. His black hair with the slightest hints of grey ruffled against his fingertips.

“Just let him take her, honey,” Norma added. “I’m already running late.”

Who knew what she was late for on a Saturday morning. Probably her yoga class. Because *that* was far more important than helping her stepdaughter.

“Fine.” Dad caved. He took a step toward Colton and looked him straight in the eyes. “If you cause one tiny scratch on my precious girl, you will be sorry you ever got behind the wheel.”

“Yes, sir.” Colton swallowed hard. “I will get her there safely.”

Colton and Dad moved her suitcase and bags from the trunk of her car into the Camaro.

Natalie gave her dad a quick hug, but as she pulled away, he locked his arms tightly around her. “Daddy, I’m fine.”

“I love you,” he said.

She turned her head and placed a kiss on his stubbly cheek. “I love you too.”

“Call me if you don’t catch the bus.” He kissed the top of her head.

“I will.” She turned from her dad’s arms and found Colton holding the door of his car open for her.

“Do you need any help?” He extended an arm to her.

“You should be really thankful that I don’t.” She brushed past him, anxious to get to the school, and climbed into the last car in the world she ever thought she’d be riding in. Her body sank into the comfy leather seat—black with yellow stitching—and she caught a whiff of Colton’s cologne, or maybe it was that new car smell she had always heard about. She wouldn’t know. Her car was fifteen years old, and her dad had never had a car younger than ten years old.

Colton took his place behind the wheel and looked over at her.

She gave him a weak smile, and he drove away slowly.

Natalie noticed the time on his dashboard read 9:12 a.m. “I don’t think we’re going to make it.”

As they rounded a curve and were out of sight of the accident, his foot pressed harder on the accelerator. “Think again.”

Natalie glanced over at the speedometer as the needle passed 80 MPH. “I thought you didn’t speed.”

“I never said that. I’ve just never been caught.” He winked at her.

She rolled her eyes.

A notification went off on Colton’s phone, and he reached for it.

Natalie snatched it before he could.

“Hey!” he exclaimed.

“Seriously? I’ve already come close to death once today. I’m not going to die because you can’t wait five minutes for a text.”

“Read it to me then.”

His lock screen was a picture of his girlfriend, Lexi—pretty, blonde, cheerleader, popular. But *mean* was the adjective Natalie would use to describe her, and she had the Snapchat screenshots to prove it.

“Passcode?” she asked.

“8008.” He snickered.

*Oh my word. He’s such a child.*



She opened his phone to another shot of Lexi—her in a skimpy bikini. Natalie wished she had Lexi’s confidence. Colton would never notice her when he had a girlfriend who looked like that. It wasn’t like she couldn’t wear a bikini if she wanted. She had been a gymnast since she was six, so she was fit and in shape. But they were on a different scale when it came to looks. Lexi and Colton were the pretty people. Pretty people always went for other pretty people. Not that Natalie wasn’t pretty in her own way. She had long, smooth brown hair, which she kind of loved, and pale blue eyes. Her beauty was simple and natural. She was happy in a t-shirt and jeans and the ratty o.d. green military jacket she had stolen from her dad. Not the kind of thing Colton would go for. She wasn’t popular. She wasn’t a cheerleader. She wasn’t Colton’s type.

“It’s from G-Dollar Sign.”

Colton laughed. “G-Money,” he corrected her.

“It says ‘OKC, where u at? Bus is rollin.’” She had no idea what OKC meant, and she wasn’t sure she wanted to know.

An expletive left Colton’s mouth, and he pushed the accelerator harder.

Natalie clung tightly to the door. “Colton! Slow down!”

He had to, whether he wanted to or not, because they had to turn left onto the road that led to the school.

When they arrived twenty minutes late, the parking lot was empty. Natalie’s stomach sank.

Another text chimed on Colton’s phone. She glanced down to see it was from G-\$ again just before Colton took his phone back. It read “Sorry, man. See ya when we get back.”

More expletives. Colton got out of his car, slammed the door, and paced around for several minutes.

Natalie fought back tears of disappointment and annoyance at Colton for ruining this for her. She pulled out her phone, about to text her dad to let him know they missed the bus, when Colton opened the door and bent down to look at her.

“Maybe we can catch them.” There was a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

“Catch them? They’ve got, like, a twenty-minute lead on us.”

“So.”

“Well, if we did catch them, what would you do with your car?”

“I can get you to the buses and drive the rest of the way by myself.”

She shook her head, which made the throbbing worse. “You can’t drive that far alone. What if you fall asleep and crash your car and die?”

He thought for a few moments, then nodded. “So, let’s just do it.”

“Do what?”

“Let’s drive there ourselves. You can be my copilot.”

“I don’t know.” A case of nerves took over in her stomach, and her mind raced to all the reasons she couldn’t go. “All the money I brought is for when I get to the beach. I don’t have extra for gas or food for a road trip.”

“I’ll pay. It’s my fault we’re in this mess anyway.”

“That’s true.”

He gave her an amused look.

She simply stared at him, not sure how to answer.

“What do you say?” His eyes pleaded with her to say yes.

“You aren’t a very safe driver, Colton. My parents would never allow it.” *Dad*. The biggest and most important reason to say no.

“You’re eighteen, right?”

Natalie nodded.

“Well, then you can do whatever you want.”

She looked as uncertain as a beginner skydiver about to take a leap for the first time.

“They don’t have to know you didn’t catch the bus,” he said.

Her mouth fell open and a little huff escaped. “You want me to lie to my parents?”

“Do whatever you want. I’m going. With or without you.” He walked to the back of the car, leaving the door ajar, and started talking on his phone to someone.

Natalie’s head was pounding. She couldn’t think straight. She grabbed her purse and rifled through the contents until she found her bottle of ibuprofen and popped a few, hoping it would take the edge off the pain.

She stared out the window at nothing in particular. Could she do this? Could she really take this trip with Colton? She brought up Google Maps on her phone and typed in Virginia Beach. From their high school in the little village of Middleville, Michigan, it was a thirteen-hour drive.

Part of her was terrified at the idea of riding another minute in a car with Colton. The other part got a thrill just thinking about spending two days alone with the guy she’d had a crush on since she was six years old.

Her phone chimed then with a text from her best friend, Olivia, asking where she was.

Colton climbed back into the car and looked at her. “What do you say?”

She had never done anything crazy like this. Ever.

“You in?” He raised an eyebrow at her.

Natalie took a deep breath. “I’m in.”

