

**ALWAYS
THE
ALMOST**

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A NOVEL

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EDWARD UNDERHILL



WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK

CHAPTER ONE

In the empty, half-lit auditorium, the strength of my whole body surges through my shoulders, down my skinny arms and bony wrists, through my hands, my fingertips, into the piano keys, until I'm nothing but a kinetic force making the massive instrument in front of me shudder. The sound bounces up to the rafters and back to the farthest row of seats; I can hear violins like they're playing around me on the empty stage, the grit of rosin against their strings as they take off on a soaring melody.

And each chord I play spells out *I. AM. REAL*.

The piano is an extension of my body—this weird body that is neither here nor there, everything and nothing all at once. I pound out each chord, just me and the piano, because here, my button-down shirt, plaid sleeves rolled to my elbows, stops being a cheap costume I found at Goodwill. Just like Pinocchio, I turn into a real boy.

Here, I can push aside the number of times this week that Mr. Gracie called me *Melissa* instead of *Miles* (seven). I can drown out Ms. Harding saying “Hey, girls” to me and Paige and Rachel and then fumbling for the next ten seconds trying to fix it. I can even turn off that vague buzz that's always in the back of my head: *You'll have to go to the bathroom sooner or later . . .*

I can ignore everything that says *ALMOST* and just *be*. As long as I'm playing the piano in this empty room by myself.

And not thinking about the new piano teacher I'm supposed to meet next week.

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Or the Tri-State Piano Competition coming up in four and a half months.

Or Cameron Hart's smug, leering face every time he wins that competition—which he has every year for the *past three years*, while I've ended up second. Every single time.

But most of all, I can ignore any thought of Shane McIntyre, ex-boyfriend extraordinaire, because seriously, *fuck that guy*.

CHAPTER TWO

Upton, Wisconsin, on New Year's Eve is *cold*. The kind of cold that makes my ears ache and my nose hurt and makes me deeply regret volunteering to pick up the pizza. Sure, it's on my way to Rachel's house, and yeah, Paige picked up the pizza last time, but the wind spiraling off the lake is freezing my whole face. And that's just on the walk from the parking lot to the lime green door of Sal's.

I pull open the door and get hit with a blast of warm air and classic rock. My glasses fog up like I just opened the dishwasher, but it doesn't really matter. I could probably find my way through Sal's with a blindfold on. Just follow the smell of melting cheese.

Sal's is deader than I thought it would be—usually I can't even hear the classic rock. Maybe everybody else decided to pay extra for delivery rather than go out in this winter vortex.

When I'm pretty sure I'm at the counter, I say, "Hi, I'm picking up?"

The blurry guy behind the counter waves at me and points to the blob pressed against his ear that's slowly resolving itself into a phone.

"Oh. Sorry." I step back. Pull out my own phone to stare at so I don't look awkward.

"Mel?"

I look up. And there, standing next to me at the counter, holding a pizza box and totally visible now that my glasses have cleared, is Shane McIntyre.

Chestnut-hair-and-chiseled-jaw Shane McIntyre.

Looks-broad-and-strong-even-in-a-puffy-coat Shane McIntyre.

Star-running-back-who-broke-up-with-me-two-weeks-ago
Shane McIntyre.

I have got to stop walking into buildings with fogged-up glasses.

“Um.” I somehow manage to find my voice. “Actually, my name is—”

“Miles.” Shane’s shoulders hunch up under his orange-and-black down coat—the same coat he was wearing the last time we were this close. “Right. Sorry.”

I don’t want to think about the last time we were this close, sitting on a bench in Palmer Park, staring at flat gray Lake Michigan, while he told me he *didn’t want to hurt my feelings* and was *trying to get it*, but we should break up. Because, yeah, when I cut my hair short (six months ago), he thought it was cute. And it was totally fine if I didn’t like girl clothes anymore (three months ago). But now I was *Miles*. (Four weeks ago.)

And Shane McIntyre is Pretty Sure He’s Not Gay. In that can’t-look-you-in-the-eye, don’t-you-see-how-awkward-this-would-be-for-football kind of way.

“It’s okay.” I shrug like it’s no big deal, because I don’t want it to be a big deal. “Picking up pizza?”

He looks down at the pizza box in his hands. *Obviously* he’s picking up pizza. What’s wrong with me?

But it’s Shane, so he just says, “Yeah. I’m going over to DeShawn’s with some of the guys from the team. You?”

“Going over to Rachel’s.” I try to grin. “A little less romantic than last year, huh?”

Shane’s forehead wrinkles and he looks away. *Way to go, Miles. Foot right in mouth*. Because now we’re both thinking about last New Year’s Eve, when we’d been dating for two weeks. We sat wrapped up in blankets on Shane’s front porch, watching the

fireworks livestream from Milwaukee on his laptop. It was sort of silly—we could have just watched inside—but it felt special, in that moment. Sitting outside like we were watching the fireworks for real. Using the freezing temperature as an excuse to get closer to each other.

Shane recovers first. “Yeah, I guess.”

I clear my throat, stuff my hands in my pockets, and look at the guy behind the counter. But he’s still on the phone, with what is apparently the world’s longest pizza order.

“Well.” Shane’s shoulders hunch even higher. “Guess I better go.”

“Yeah.” I attempt another grin, but it feels like a grimace. “Have fun with the guys.”

“Thanks.” He turns away without looking at me.

Behind the counter, Pizza Guy finally hangs up the phone. “Jacobson?” He points to me. “Picking up?”

“Yeah.” But I’m looking after Shane, already pushing back out the door. I fumble with my wallet. “Just the large cheese—”

“Here you go.” Pizza Guy slides a box across the counter.

I pull out a twenty. “Thanks. Keep the change.” I grab the pizza box, dodge past the people by the window, and lean my shoulder into the door. The wind hits me like a hundred icicles. “Shane! Wait!”

He’s halfway across the quiet street, but he pauses. Wanders back to the curb.

“Sorry, I just . . .” *Come on, Miles. You’ve been wanting to say this for two weeks. Now’s your chance.* “I’m the same person, Shane. I’m not any different.”

It sounds hollow, even to me. I thought it was true the first time I said it (to Rachel), and it still felt sort of true the second time (to my parents), but now it’s starting to feel like a line I got off the internet.

Which I did. Late-night anxious Googling: *how to tell people you’re trans.*

Shane lets his breath out. It puffs in a cloud in front of him. “I know you keep saying that, but you *are* different. You’re a guy now.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t make me a different person.”

“Look, I gotta go.” He retreats a step, holding up the pizza box like an excuse.

“Shane—”

“Happy New Year.” He meets my eyes, briefly, and then he turns and walks away, crossing the street toward the white Ford pickup with the bashed-in bumper that he’s been driving to school all semester. The dent in the bumper kind of cradles you when you lean against it—which I discovered while waiting for Shane after a football game. When I pointed it out to him, I thought he might laugh at me, but he just grinned and promised never to get the dent fixed.

Part of me wants to run across the street after him now. Point to that dent and come up with something cool to say about it, so we could laugh and have—I don’t know—a *moment*.

But he’s already climbing into his truck. The engine roars to life. And there goes Shane McIntyre, ex-boyfriend extraordinaire, rumbling down the street and leaving me and my large cheese pizza freezing on the sidewalk.

The thing is, I don’t believe Shane—that we’re done just because I’m a guy now. You don’t date someone for a whole year, tell them you love them, and then ditch them the second they, well, change. Who cares what the change is.

I still love Shane. That’s something that *hasn’t* changed. Not after I cut my hair, not after I changed my clothes, not after I changed my name and my pronouns. Not even after I crashed out those chords on the piano in the auditorium because *fuck that guy*.

You like who you like. I just need to help Shane figure that out. Remind him why he liked me in the first place. Prove to him I'm still the same person, and he can like the new exterior. It doesn't have to be more complicated than that.

When I try to explain this to Rachel and Paige, they look at me like I've just grown a second head.

We're sitting in Rachel's room. The pizza is almost gone and the TV downstairs gently vibrates the carpeted floor underneath us. Rachel's parents are watching the ball drop live from New York City.

"It's *way* more complicated than that," says Rachel.

"No, it's not. Look at you guys."

Rachel and Paige look at each other. They're the only two people who haven't messed up my name or pronouns once. When I came out to them, I got a squeal and a hug from Rachel, and a fist-bump and *Hell yeah* from Paige. Honestly, I think they both saw it coming. Rachel was just a little disappointed I didn't also seem to be interested in girls. She wanted to set me up with someone—even though we seem to be the only three queerdos in all of Grant East High.

Well, us plus Shane. I hope.

"It's different," Paige says to me. Paige has been friends with us since middle school and has had the same chin-length black hair the entire time. It definitely should not be cool, especially with the barrettes she wears, but somehow she pulls it off. Maybe it's the Doc Martens boots she's constantly wearing, or her oversized but perfectly draped punk rock T-shirts.

"Only because we started dating *after* we came out," Rachel says quickly.

Rachel told me she liked girls when we were ten. She wore a suit to her bat mitzvah and only got vaguely frustrated looks from the rabbi. Her dark hair is long and frizzy, but you still know immediately that she's queer. It's probably the plaid shirts

and the boots. The large rainbow pin on her backpack definitely helps.

“It’s just”—Paige reaches across Rachel for another piece of room temperature pizza—“we both knew who we were. Are. You know—before we got together.”

“Gay,” I say.

“*Super gay*,” says Rachel. She leans over and kisses Paige on the cheek. “Look, I know you just saw him, but you should forget about Shane. If he wants to break up, he doesn’t deserve you. He’s just a straight and narrow-minded jock. Fuck that guy.”

“Yeah,” I say, but mostly because I want to drop it. I thought Rachel and Paige would get it—that they’d agree that love should transcend stuff like short hair and clothes and pronouns. It should see who you really are. Or at least take your word for it.

I shouldn’t have called Rachel after the breakup, when I was angry. I shouldn’t have said *fuck that guy*, because now she won’t let it go. The truth is, Rachel never really liked Shane. Paige wasn’t that into him either, but Paige is ambivalent about most people. Rachel, though, really couldn’t see past the football. At first she thought it was fun that I was dating him—her best friend with such a *hunk*. But the longer it went on, the less into him she was. She didn’t think there was any *there* there.

“He’s a jock,” she would say. “I know I’m stereotyping, but he plays *football*.”

And then she’d look at me like maybe, this time, I’d have a different reaction.

“You *are* stereotyping,” I’d say. “He’s more than that.”

And he was. He is. He loves true crime podcasts. He’s weirdly obsessed with submarines. He asked me out for the first time after I played a Mozart concerto with our truly shitty high school orchestra, which means he’s the kind of guy who goes to a truly shitty high school orchestra concert.

But I don’t want to get into it tonight, so I lean back against

Rachel's bed and let it go. Lick pizza grease off my fingers while Rachel nuzzles her face against Paige's shoulder and Paige rolls her eyes, grinning. I'm happy for them. Really. I can see how happy they make each other. I mean, Paige doesn't grin like that for just anybody.

But it's weird when your two best friends start dating. They're suddenly in their own club. I didn't used to mind because I had membership in that club with Shane; we were all on equal footing. Without Shane, I'm out, demoted to Awkward Third Wheel. I know they're not trying to exclude me. Paige and I still share a secret look when Rachel finds a new cause to have Feelings about. And I still tell Rachel some things before I tell Paige, because Rachel has been my friend forever and that's how it works. But they take up space in a different way. More of our space belongs to them.

We go to bed shortly before midnight. It's already long past midnight in New York and Rachel's parents are asleep. We make up a mound of blankets on the floor of Rachel's bedroom because Rachel says it's too unequal for one person to get her bed.

Rachel and Paige are breathing quietly within five minutes, all that pizza we ate catching up with them. But I'm awake when we hit the New Year. Staring at my phone.

11:59.

12:00.

January first. I need a New Year's resolution.

I roll over onto my back. Above me, the mobile of tarot cards hanging from Rachel's ceiling spins slowly in the dry breeze of the house's central heating. (Rachel might have been raised Jewish, but she identifies firmly as "atheist pagan.")

I know exactly what my resolutions are. They're sitting there, right on top of my brain, like they've been waiting for the right moment.

One: Beat Cameron Hart at the Tri-State Piano Competition.

Two: Win back Shane McIntyre.

Because *fuck that guy*, and also, I really miss him.

Two resolutions. That seems like a good number. Not too complicated. I have four months for one, and, well, however long it takes for the other.

How hard can that be?

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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