

Tonight
Leila Sales the
Streets
Are
Ours

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Summary: After seventeen-year-old Arden, of Cumberland, Maryland, is rejected by all of the colleges she applied to, she finds solace in the blog of an aspiring writer who lives in New York City, but when she goes to meet him, she discovers that he is a very different person than she believes him to be.

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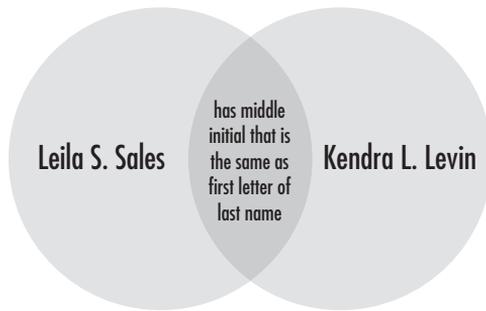
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*Dedicated to Kendra Levin,
for everything we share*



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“Sometimes one can realize that a person is unworthy of love and love them anyway; one can form an unexplainable attachment that cannot be broken even when the object of one’s affection breaks the confidences with which you entrusted them. Sometimes the one you love is blind to your feelings and for all your conversation you cannot find the words to explain it.”

—from *The Thief of Time*, by John Boyne

“Yes, there’s love if you want it, don’t sound like no sonnet, my lord.”

—from “Sonnet,” by the Verve

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Part One

Welcome

*L*ike all stories, the one you are about to read is a love story.

If it wasn't, what would be the point?

Everything falls apart

*Y*ou can find your own way home,” Arden says to Lindsey, her voice shaking with rage.

“Home . . . to Maryland?” Lindsey asks.

The three strangers sitting on mildewing couches beside Lindsey look on impassively. The mannequin’s head, which hangs from a noose in the center of the room, sways gently back and forth, like it’s making eye contact with Arden, then Lindsey, then back again.

Arden hesitates. “I mean, if you need my help . . .” she begins, but it’s too late. Lindsey shakes her head. *No*. “Okay, then,” Arden says. “You’re on your own. Just how you wanted it.”

“What’s her *problem?*” the girl with a ring pierced through the center of her nose asks Lindsey, sneering at Arden.

Arden has almost never heard anybody speak about her in that tone of voice. Her stomach twists, and she swallows hard, looking to the boy by her side for support. He nods, and that gives her the courage she needs.

“I’m over this,” Arden says to Lindsey. “Good luck finding your way out of here.”

She turns and walks away, her legs trembling with every step. She focuses directly in front of her, navigating through the press of bodies and random sculptures of fairies and trees.

“Arden, wait!” she hears Lindsey call behind her, and she turns. But that must have just been her imagination crying out, because Lindsey is still sitting on the couch, talking to the pierced-nose girl, as if everything is normal. As if she doesn’t even care that Arden is leaving her.

So Arden squares her shoulders. And she keeps walking away.

Let's go back in time

Two months before that night, back when Arden and Lindsey were still inseparable, when the only septum piercing Arden had ever seen was on punk rockers on TV and the only mannequins she'd encountered had been modeling clothes in store windows, shortly before the end of the school day on a Friday in February, Arden was summoned to the principal's office.

A runner showed up at her Spanish class and briefly consulted with Senor Stephanopoulos, and Arden paid no attention because when the principal needed someone, it never had anything to do with her. Instead she took this break in the class to try to make sense of her notes, which were supposed to illuminate the future tense, but which in practice just said things like *Irregular verbs . . . something* and *Add "i" or "e" to end of words FIRST PERSON ONLY (??)*.

Spanish was not Arden's strong suit.

"Arden." Senor Stephanopoulos beckoned her. "You're needed in Principal Vanderpool's office."

There were a few “Ooohs” from her classmates, but half-hearted ones; none of them actually believed that Arden Huntley, of all people, would be in trouble serious enough that it would warrant a visit to the principal.

“I’ll take notes for you,” whispered Arden’s friend Naomi. Arden smiled her thanks. Naomi’s notes tended to be word-for-word transcripts of teachers’ lectures in stunningly legible purple-penned handwriting.

Arden lifted her bag and followed the runner out of the classroom, through a series of halls, and downstairs. Cumberland was one of those towns where land was at the opposite of a premium. It was in northwestern Maryland, so far west it was almost West Virginia, so far north it was almost Pennsylvania, a solid two-hour drive from the nearest big city (which was Pittsburgh), in a corner of the world that should have been called something like MaryVirgiPenn, but wasn’t. All Cumberland *had* was land. As a result, the high school was sprawling, megamall-size—and the principal’s office was at the other end of it.

Maybe Arden should have been nervous on that long walk to the principal, but she wasn’t. She suspected this had something to do with her mother, and as such, she flat-out refused to care.

Eventually they reached Vanderpool’s office, and the runner left her under the watchful eye of Mr. Winchell, the principal’s geriatric secretary. Arden waited on a too-small plastic chair that seemed better suited to an elementary school than to Allegany High.

When she thought Mr. Winchell wasn’t watching, Arden slid

her cell phone out of her bag and texted Lindsey. GOT CALLED INTO VAN'S OFFICE. WTF.

A minute later, Lindsey texted back. Arden knew that Lindsey should be in Earth Studies right now, so either she was cutting or she was texting in the middle of class, both of which seemed like plausible Lindsey behaviors.

OH SHIT was Lindsey's reply, and that gave Arden her first inkling that perhaps her best friend knew more than she herself did about why the principal wanted her. But before Arden could ask what, exactly, "oh shit" meant, Mr. Winchell snapped, "No telephones!" in the triumphant fashion of a man who has missed his true calling as a prison warden.

After another ten minutes of waiting, Arden was brought in to see the principal. Mr. Vanderpool was a preposterously tall human—so tall that it was easy not to notice how bald he was unless he was seated—who seemed awkward whenever confronted with actual teenagers rather than school board members or faculty. He rarely wandered the hallways and never showed his face in the cafeteria; his one interaction with the student body as a whole was during assembly, when he would stand on the stage and address them en masse from afar. He had a seemingly endless collection of novelty neckties, which was either the one area of his life where he gave himself permission to entertain whimsy or was his sad attempt at appearing kid-friendly. Arden wasn't totally sure that Mr. Vanderpool knew who she was, as this was their first proper conversation in her nearly three years at his school.

"Arden Huntley," he said once she was seated in his office,

on the other side of his desk. “Do you want to tell me why you’re here?”

Arden blinked at him. “You called me here, Principal Vanderpool.”

He looked pained. “I am aware of that. Do you want to tell me *why* I called you here?”

Arden really wished that Lindsey had said something a little more useful than “oh shit.”

“Um, I don’t know,” Arden told the principal.

He cleared his throat and reached into a drawer in his desk. What he pulled out was a small plastic bag filled with some brownish flakes. “Does this look familiar?” he asked Arden.

“No?”

He sighed. “Arden, we found this bag of drugs in your locker today.”

“What were you doing in my locker?” Arden blurted out, even though that was, perhaps, not her most pressing question.

“Routine random locker checks,” Mr. Vanderpool replied. “But what I’d like to know is, what was *this*”—here he shook the baggie—“doing in your locker?”

Now Arden knew exactly what Lindsey’s text message had meant, and she knew the answer to the principal’s question, as well.

She and Lindsey shared lockers, as they shared pretty much everything. Thanks to stupid school bureaucracy and geography, they had been assigned lockers on opposite ends of the building from each other, and from where most of their classes

and activities were. So Lindsey usually used the one that was officially Arden's, because it was closer to the gym, while Arden usually stored her stuff in Lindsey's, which was right by the theater and library. They had always known each other's combinations, to school lockers and to everything else, and Arden had seen nothing but benefits to this sort of sharing.

But that was before Lindsey, apparently, stashed a bag of pot in her locker.

Arden knew that Lindsey got high sometimes: weekends, parties, whatever. People did that—not *Arden*, but people, fine. But how could Lindsey have been so dumb, so thoughtless and foolhardy, as to bring it into school? Their school had a zero tolerance policy, a minimum three-day suspension for any student found in possession of any sort of drugs, no matter what kind, no matter what the quantity—though if they were worse drugs, in higher quantities, you risked a longer suspension or even expulsion. Everybody knew this.

But the worst part, for Lindsey, was that getting caught with drugs meant you were immediately kicked off all sports teams for the rest of the year. No way around it. And Lindsey *lived* for the school track team. She loved running roughly as much as Arden hated it. Not only that, but being recruited for track was basically Lindsey's only hope for getting accepted into a good college. She didn't have a whole lot else going for her. This was not, by the way, Arden's opinion. This was the opinion of countless guidance counselors, teachers, and Lindsey's own parents.

Arden knew what would happen if she explained how that bag of marijuana wound up in her locker. Lindsey would lose it all. Over one casual, stupid decision, and one massive helping of bad luck. That sounded about par for the course for Lindsey.

But fortunately, Arden didn't play any sports.