



Disclaimer: All the real names of places, people, and events have been altered or abbreviated to protect the innocent. Namely, me.

hey people!

Ever have that totally freakish feeling that someone is listening in on your conversations, spying on you and your friends while you sip lattes on the ivory-colored steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, following you to premieres and parties, and just generally stalking you? Well, they are. Or actually, I am. And the truth is, I've been here all along, because I'm one of you. One of the Chosen Ones.

Don't get out much? Hair so processed it's fried your brain? Perhaps you're not one of us after all and you have no clue what I'm talking about or who 'we' are. Allow me to expound. We're an exclusive group of indescribably beautiful people who happen to live in those majestic, green-awned, white-glove-doorman buildings near Central Park. We attend Manhattan's most elite single-sex private schools. Our families own yachts, estates, and vineyards in various exotic locations throughout the world. We frequent all the best beaches and the most exclusive ski resorts in Austria and Utah. We're seated immediately at the finest restaurants in the chicest neighborhoods with nary a reservation. We turn heads. But don't confuse us with Hollywood actors or models or rock stars – those people you feel like you know because you read so much about them in the tabloids, but who are actually completely boring compared to the roles they play or the ballads they sing. There's nothing boring about me or my friends, and the more I tell you about us, the more you'll be dying to know. I've kept quiet until now, but something has happened, and if I don't share it with the world I'm absolutely going to burst.

the greatest story ever told

We learned in our eleventh-grade creative writing class this week that most great stories begin in one of the following fashions: someone mysteriously disappears, or a stranger comes to town. The tale I'm about to tell is of the 'someone mysteriously disappears' variety.

To be specific, **S** is gone. The steps of the Met are no longer graced with her blond splendor. We are no longer distracted in Latin class by the sight of her twirling her pale locks around and around her long, slim fingers while she daydreams about a certain emerald-eyed boy.

But keep your panties on, I'll get to that in a moment.

The point is, **S** has disappeared. And in order to solve the mystery of why she's left and where she's gone, I'm going to have to backtrack to last winter – the winter of our sophomore year – when the La Mer skin cream hit the fan and our pretty pink rose-scented bubble burst. It all began with three inseparable, perfectly innocent, über-gorgeous fifteen-year-olds. Well, they're sixteen now, and let's just say that two of them are not that innocent.

An epic such as this requires an observant, quick-witted scribe. That would be me, since I *was* at the scene of every crime, and I happen to have an impeccable eye for the most outrageous details. So sit back while I unravel the past and reveal everyone's secrets, because I know everything, and what I don't know I'll invent elaborately.

Admit it, you're already falling for me.

You know I love you,

Gossip
GIRL

like most juicy stories, it started with one boy and two girls

‘Truce!’ Serena van der Woodsen screamed as Nate Archibald body-checked her into a three-foot-high drift of powdery white snow. Cold and wet, it tunneled into her ears and down her pants. Nate dove on top of her, all five foot eleven inches of his perfect, golden-brown-haired, glittering-green-eyed, fifteen-year-old boyness. He smelled like Downy and the L’Occitane sandalwood soap the maid stocked his bathroom with. Serena just lay there, trying to breathe with him on top of her. ‘My scalp is cold,’ she pleaded, getting a mouthful of Nate’s snow-dampened, godlike curls as she spoke.

Nate sighed reluctantly, as if he could have spent the rest of the morning outside in the frigid February meat locker that was the back garden of his family’s Eighty-second-Street-just-off-Park-Avenue Manhattan town house. He rolled onto his back and wriggled like Serena’s long-dead golden retriever, Guppy, when she used to let him loose on the green grass of the Great Lawn in Central Park. Then he stood up, awkwardly dusting off the seat of his neatly pressed Brooks Brothers khakis. It was Saturday, but he still wore the same clothes he wore every weekday as a sophomore at the St. Jude’s School for Boys over on East End Avenue. It was the unofficial Prince of the Upper East Side uniform, the same uniform he and his classmates had been wearing since they’d started nursery school together at Park Avenue Presbyterian.

Nate held out his hand to help Serena to her feet. Behind him rose the clean-looking limestone prewar luxury buildings of Park Avenue’s Golden Mile, with their terraced penthouses and plate-glass windows. Still, nothing beat living in an actual house with an entire wing of one’s own and a back garden with a fountain and

cherry trees in it, within walking distance of one's best friends' houses, Serendipity 3, and Barneys. Serena frowned cautiously up at Nate, worried that he was only faking her out and was about to tackle her again. 'I really am cold,' she insisted.

He flapped his hand at her impatiently. 'I know. Come on.'

She pretended to pick her nose and then grabbed his hand with her faux-snotty one. 'Thanks, pal.' She staggered to her feet. 'You're a real chum.'

Nate led the way inside. The backs of his pant legs were damp and she could see the outline of his tighty-whiteys. Really, how gay of him! He held the glass-paned French doors open and stood aside to let her pass. Serena kicked off her baby blue Uggs and scuffed her bare, Urban Decay Piggy Bank Pink-toenailed feet down the long hall to the stately town house's enormous, barely used all-white Italian Modern kitchen. Nate's father, Captain Archibald, was a former sea captain-turned-banker, and his mother was a French society hostess. They were basically never home, and when they were home, they were at the opera.

'Are you hungry?' Nate asked, following her across the gleaming white marble floor. 'I'm so sick of takeout. My parents have been in Venezuela or Santa Domingo or wherever for like two weeks, and I've been eating pizza or sushi every freaking night. I asked Regina to buy ham, Swiss, Pepperidge Farm white bread, Grammy Smith apples, and peanut butter. All I want is the food I ate in kindergarten.' He tugged anxiously on a messy lock of wavy golden brown hair. 'Maybe I'm going through some sort of midlife crisis or something.'

Like his life is so stressful?

'It's *Granny* Smith, silly,' Serena informed him fondly. She opened a glossy white cupboard and found an unopened box of cinnamon-and-brown-sugar Pop-Tarts. Ripping it open, she removed one of the packets from inside, tore it open with her neat, white teeth, and pulled out a thickly frosted pastry. She sucked on the Pop-Tart's sweet, crumbly corner and hopped up on the counter, kicking the cupboards below with her size eight-and-a-half feet. Pop-Tarts at Nate's. She'd been having them there since she was five years old. And now . . . and now . . .

‘Mom and Dad want me to go to boarding school next year,’ she announced, her enormous, almost navy blue eyes growing huge and glassy as they welled up with unexpected tears. Go away to boarding school and leave Nate? It hurt too much to even think about.

Nate flinched as if he’d been slapped in the face by an invisible hand. He grabbed the other Pop-Tart from the packet and hopped up on the counter next to her. ‘No way,’ he responded decisively. She couldn’t leave. He wouldn’t allow it.

‘They want to travel more,’ she explained, the pink, perfect curve of her lower lip trembling dangerously. ‘If I’m home, they feel like they need to be home more. Like I want them around? Anyway, they’ve arranged for me to meet some of the deans of admissions and stuff. It’s like I have no choice.’

Nate scooted over a few inches and wrapped his arm around her sharply defined shoulders. ‘The city is going to suck if you’re not here,’ he told her earnestly. ‘You can’t go.’

Serena took a deep, shuddering breath and rested her pale blond head on his shoulder. ‘I love you,’ she murmured without thinking. Their bodies were so close the entire Nate-side of her hummed. If she turned her head and tilted her chin just so, she could have easily kissed his warm, lovely neck. And she wanted to. She was actually dying to, because she really did love him, with all her heart.

She did? Hello? Since when?!

Maybe since ballroom-dancing school way back in fourth grade. She was tall for her age, and Nate was always such a gentleman about her lack of rhythm and the way she stepped on his insteps and jutted her bony elbows into his sides. He’d finesse it by grabbing her hand and spinning her around so that the skirt of her puffy oyster-colored satin tea-length Bonpoint dress twirled out magnificently. Their teacher, Mrs. Jaffe, who had long blue hair that she kept in place with a pearl-adorned black hairnet, worshipped Nate. So did Serena’s best friend, Blair Waldorf. And so did Serena – she just hadn’t realized it until now. She shivered and her perfect, still-tan-from-Christmas-in-the-Caribbean skin broke out in a rash of goosebumps. Her whole body seemed to be having an adverse

reaction to the idea of revealing something she'd kept so well hidden for so long, even from herself.

Nate slipped his lacrosse-toned arms around her long, narrow waist and pulled her close, tucking her pale gold head into the crook of his neck and massaging the ruts between the ribs on her back with his fingertips. The best thing about Serena was her total lack of embarrassing flab. Her entire body was as long and lean and taut as the strings on his Prince titanium tennis racket.

It was painful having such a ridiculously hot best friend. Why couldn't his best friend be some lard-assed dude with zits and dandruff? Instead he had Serena and Blair Waldorf, hands down the two hottest girls on the Upper East Side, and maybe all of Manhattan, or even the whole world.

Serena was an absolute goddess – every guy Nate knew talked about her – but she was perplexingly unpredictable. She'd laugh for hours if she spotted a cloud shaped like a toilet seat or something equally ridiculous, and the next moment she'd be wistful and sad. It was impossible to tell what she was thinking most of the time. Sometimes Nate wondered if she would've been more comfortable in a body that was slightly less perfect, because it would've given her more *incentive*, to use an SAT vocabulary word. Like she wasn't sure what she had to aspire to, since she basically had everything a girl could possibly want.

Blair was petite, with a pretty, foxlike face, cobalt blue eyes, and wavy chestnut-colored hair. Way back in fifth grade, Serena had told Nate she was convinced Blair had a crush on him. He started to notice that Blair did sort of stick her chest out when she knew he was looking, and she was always either bossing him around or fixing his hair. Of course Blair never admitted that she liked him, which made him like her even more.

Nate sighed deeply. No one understood how difficult it was to be best friends with two such beautiful, impossible girls.

Like he would have been friends with them if they were awkward and butt-ugly?

He closed his eyes and breathed in the sweet scent of Serena's Frédéric Fekkai Apple Cider clarifying shampoo. He'd kissed a few girls and had even gone to third base last June with L'Wren Knowes,

a very experienced older Seaton Arms School senior who really did seem to know everything. But kissing Serena would be . . . different. He loved her. It was as simple as that. She was his best friend, and he loved her.

And if you can't kiss your best friend, who *can* you kiss?