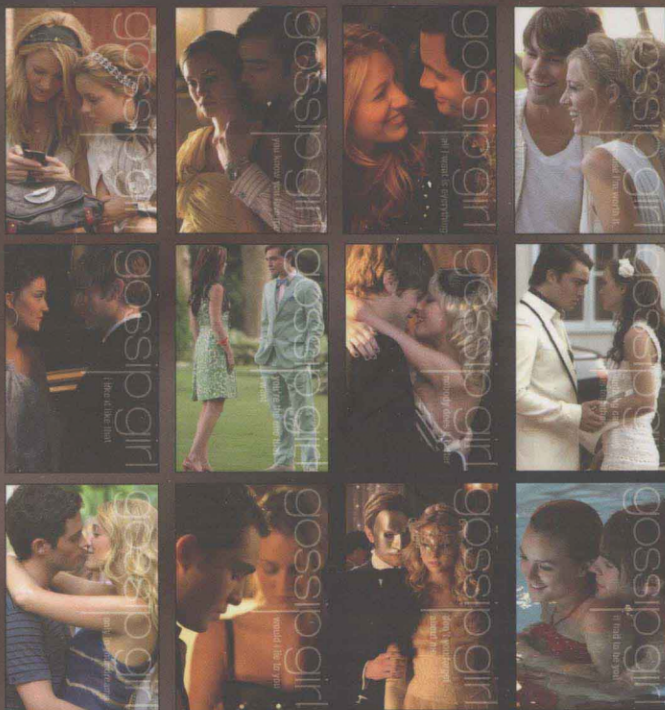


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novel

by
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poppy

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I must be cruel only to be kind.

—William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*



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

hey people!

Only two weeks left to make up our minds about which college we want to go to—for those of us who have a choice. Meanwhile, we are busy mastering the art of not flunking out of our last ever term of high school while spending as little time as possible actually in school or doing homework. If you see a group of immaculately groomed girls shedding their blue-and-white-seersucker school uniforms and lying out in Sheep Meadow in Central Park in their cute new Malia Mills bikinis, that's us. If you see a group of shirtless boys in rolled-up khakis and bare feet, platinum Cartier tank watches gleaming from their tanned, lacrosse-muscle arms, those would be our boyfriends. And okay, yeah, it's only 11 A.M. on a Friday and we're supposed to be in gym or AP French, but we're nearing the end of the most difficult year of our lives and we have a lot of excess steam to blow off, so cut us some slack, okay?

Better yet, *join us.*

In case you've been hiding under a rock somewhere and don't yet know us—doesn't everyone?—we are the belles of the ball, the princesses and princes of New York's Upper East Side. Most of the time we live in penthouse apartments in those stately doorman buildings on Park or Fifth Avenues or in town houses that take up half a city block. The rest of the time we're at one of our "country" houses, which vary in size and location from compounds in Connecticut or the Hamptons to medieval castles in Ireland to beachfront villas in St. Barts. Weekdays there is school—*yawn*—at one of Manhattan's small, single-sex, uniform-required private schools. Weekends we

play *hard*, especially now that the weather is fine and our parents are off in their yachts or private jets or driver-operated town cars, leaving us crazy kids to do as we please.

And what pleases us most right now is one of our favorite three-letter words. You may not be doing it, but you're definitely talking about it. *Everyone's* talking about it. And some of us are doing it. Especially . . .

The couple that may as well be married

They sleep together, eat together, and have started sharing each other's clothes, as if they couldn't be bothered with sorting out the rumpled pile of his-and-hers clothing beside the bed and just shrugged into the nearest thing, knowing it would soon be shrugged off again. Neither of them can go anywhere alone without people asking "Where's ___?" as if it's totally unbelievable that they'd spend more than thirty seconds apart. I know, I can hear you scoffing already. Like, how boring to have only one boyfriend. But face it, they're definitely doing more than just *talking* about that three-letter word, which is more than can be said for the rest of us.

Your e-mail

Q:

Dear GG,

My dad is an independent film producer and he's at Cannes right now for the festival. Everyone is talking about this documentary about "privileged New York City teens," but no one knows who made it. First of all, are you in the film? Second of all, are you the one who made it?

—LAgirl

A:

Dear LAgirl,

I can't really answer your first question because I haven't seen the film, but it sounds awfully familiar. . . . A certain shaven-headed girl was following everyone around with a camera a few weeks back. . . . As for your second question—I can barely take pictures with my camera-phone!

—GG

Sightings

S after midnight, tiptoeing out to the mailbox outside her **Fifth Avenue** apartment building with her arms full of big white envelopes emblazoned with various college crests. She was wearing an itty-bitty baby blue Cosabella nightgown that barely covered her famously gorgeous bottom (to the delight of all the doormen on duty and all the cabbies stuck in traffic), but tiptoed back inside again without mailing anything. It must be tough making a decision about next year when she got into every school she applied to, and maybe even some that she didn't! **C** taking his military-issue scary-looking black boots to **Tod's** for a little spruce-up. He's going to be the first cadet ever to wear pink tassels on his boots. **D** and **J** fighting over the mirror in **H&M**. Looks like a little sibling rivalry has set in now that they're both so famous. **V** at an Internet café in **Williamsburg** IMing random strangers. That girl has no fear. **K** and **I** feasting and scheming in **Jackson Hole**. Oh, God, what now? No sign of **N** or **B** . . . Jeez, don't they ever get bored of each other? What if they have to be apart next year?

Decisions, decisions . . . Where will we all be in one year's time? Can we possibly survive without each other? Try not to freak out—yet. You know where to find me in case you need help, or company, or want to invite me over for one of those spontaneous rooftop parties that end-of-the-year seniors are so famous for having.

You know I love you,

gossip girl

n's bedroom is 100% pure love

“Wake up!” Blair Waldorf yanked off the Black Watch plaid duvet and let it fall to the floor beside the antique sleigh bed. Nate Archibald lay sprawled across the mattress on his stomach, naked and very relaxed. Blair sat down beside him and bounced up and down as hard as she could. Nate kept his eyes closed as her ruthless bouncing jarred his golden brown head up and down. Why was it that s-e-x made her so *hyper* and him so *sleepy*?

“I’m awake,” he mumbled. He opened one glittering green eye and instantly felt more awake than he had a second before. Blair was naked too, all five feet four inches of her, from her shiny coral-glossed toes to the chestnut brown waves of her grown-out pixie cut. She had the type of body that looked even better naked than in clothes. Soft without being fat, and more delicate than her usual costumes of preppy, neatly creased jeans and cashmere cardigans or short, tight little black dresses let on. She was still a pain in his ass, but they’d been in and out of love pretty much since they were eleven years old, and he’d wanted to get naked with her for even longer. How typical that it had taken Blair six and a half years to stop fighting with him and finally do it.

And once they'd done it, they couldn't *stop* doing it.

Nate reached up and pulled her down on top of him, kissing her randomly and ferociously because she was finally *his*, all his.

"Hey!" Blair giggled. The navy blue silk Roman blinds were raised and the windows were open, but it wasn't like she cared if anyone saw or heard them. They were in love, they were beautiful, and they were sex fiends. If anyone was looking, it was only because they were seriously jealous.

Besides, she relished the attention, even from the random perverted Peeping Toms and Thomasinas who happened to be spying on them through gold-plated opera glasses from the windows of the surrounding town houses.

They kissed for a while, but Nate was too worn out to do much else. Blair rolled away from him and lit a cigarette, giving Nate little puffs every once and a while like the actors in *Breathless*, the supercool black-and-white French film she'd watched earlier that day in AP French. The blond female lead always looked so chic and beautiful and was never without lipstick. All the people in the movie did all day was ride around on a Vespa motorbike, have sex, sit in cafés, and smoke. Of course they always looked gorgeous. But Blair had to keep her grades up if she wanted to get off Yale's wait list, and what with school and homework and sex with Nate every day after school, there was hardly time for primping. Blair's wavy brown hair was matted and sweaty, her lips were chapped from prolonged kissing and infrequent lip gloss application, and she hadn't plucked her eyebrows in two whole days. Not that she really minded. Sacrificing a little personal grooming time for sex was totally worth it. Besides, she'd read somewhere that an hour of sex burns three hundred and sixty calories, so even if she was a little scruffy, at least she'd be skinny!

She reached up and felt the stubble gathering between her dark, neatly arched eyebrows. Okay, so maybe she minded just a *teensy* bit, but she could always grab a cab down to Elizabeth Arden for an eyebrow wax.

Stubble aside, Blair had never felt so happy. After finally doing it with Nate nearly two weeks ago, she was a whole new woman. The only dark cloud in her rosy sky was the irritating fact that she was still only wait-listed at Yale. Just exactly how were she and Nate going to get together every afternoon if she wound up having to go to Georgetown in DC—the only school that had actually accepted her—and he was up at Yale in New Haven, Connecticut, or Brown in Providence, Rhode Island, or one of the other great schools he'd so unfairly gotten into? Not that she was bitter, but Nate had shown up stoned for the SATs, took no APs, and barely had a B average, while she was in every AP Constance Billard offered, had gotten a 1490 on her SAT, and had almost an A+ average.

Okay, so maybe she was *slightly* bitter.

"If I joined the Peace Corps and spent a couple of years building sewers and making sandwiches for starving children in, like, Rio or somewhere, then Yale would *have* to take me, wouldn't they?" she asked aloud.

Nate grinned. Here was the thing about Blair that he loved. She was spoiled, but she wasn't lazy. She knew what she wanted, and because she believed absolutely that she could have *everything* she wanted if she tried hard enough to get it, she never stopped trying.

"I heard everyone gets sick in the Peace Corps. And you have to speak the native language."

"I'll do it in France then." Blair blew smoke up at the ceiling. "Or one of those African countries where they speak French." She tried to imagine herself conversing with the

natives in some arid African village while balancing a clay pot of fresh goat's milk on her head and wearing an elaborately dyed caftan that could be supremely sexy if tied in the right places. She'd have a killer tan and would be nothing but muscle and bone from all the hard work and horrible intestinal diseases. Children would clamor at her knees for the Godiva chocolates she'd order for them, and she'd smile serenely down at them like a beautiful, unwrinkled Mother Teresa. When she returned to the States she'd win some Peace Corps award for best volunteer, or even the Nobel Peace Prize. She'd have dinner with the president, who would write her a recommendation to Yale, and then Yale would fall all over themselves to accept her.

Nate was pretty sure the Peace Corps only helped out in third-world countries, not economically thriving places like France, and no way would Blair last more than half an hour in some remote African village where they didn't have Sephora or even flushing toilets. Poor Blair. It was completely unfair that he'd gotten into Yale without really trying, while she, who'd wanted to go to Yale since she was two years old, had been wait-listed. Then again, Nate was used to getting things without really trying.

He propped his head up on his hand and tenderly smoothed Blair's dark hair away from her forehead. "Unless you hear soon that you got in, I promise I won't go to Yale," he vowed. "I'm fine with going to Brown or wherever."

"Really?" Blair stamped out her cigarette in the sailboat-shaped marble ashtray beside Nate's bed and flung her arms around his neck. Nate was by far the best boyfriend a girl could ever ask for. She couldn't imagine why she'd ever broken up with him, not once, but again and again.

Because he cheated on her again and again?

All Blair knew now was that she never ever wanted to leave Nate's side. She rested her cheek against his strong, bare chest. Now that she thought about it, moving into the Archibalds' town house wasn't such a bad idea, since her own house wasn't exactly an episode of *Seventh Heaven* right now. Her mother had given birth to her baby sister just over two weeks ago and was now suffering from severe postpartum depression. Just this morning Blair had left her mother weeping over a DVD sent from a Peruvian Alpaca farm. Apparently, if you adopted a herd of alpaca yearlings, you could custom-order handwoven blankets and sweaters made from the hair of the animals in your herd. Her baby sister would soon be the proud new owner of a hairy white alpaca blanket that would be completely useless all summer long, and probably the rest of her life, unless as a teenager she got into the hippie handmade-chic thing, cut a head-hole into the blanket, and fashioned it into a poncho.

Back when her mother was still pregnant, she had asked Blair to name the baby, and out of devotion to her favorite college Blair had chosen the name Yale. Now baby Yale served as a living, breathing, very noisy reminder that no matter how stunning Blair's record was, the school had all but rejected her. Worse still, the baby had taken over her bedroom, and she was forced to sleep in her stepbrother Aaron's room until she left for school in the fall. Aaron was a vegan Rastafarian dog-lover, so the room had been decorated specifically for him in wall-to-wall organic, environmentally sound products in shades of eggplant and wild sage. To add insult to injury, Blair's cat, Kitty Minky, had taken to peeing on the barley husk cushions and throwing up on the woven sea grass floor mats in an effort to rid the room of the scent of Aaron's dog, a drooling boxer named Mookie.

Hello, nasty?

Move in with Nate. Blair didn't know why she hadn't thought of it before. A freaky mother, a cat-pee-soaked bedroom, and a newborn baby sister named Yale were not exactly conducive to studying or s-e-x. It was only natural for her to seek other accommodation. Of course there was always Serena's house, but they'd tried that before and wound up fighting. Besides, Serena couldn't offer her much in the way of s-e-x.

Unless those old rumors were actually true . . .

Nate ran his hands lazily up and down her smooth bare back. "Have you ever thought about getting a tattoo?" he asked out of nowhere as he traced the lines of her shoulder blades.

Except for a brief stint in rehab earlier that year, Nate had been stoned pretty much all day every day since he was eleven, and Blair was used to his random questions. She wrinkled her pointy, slightly upturned nose at the thought of having a big scar filled with black ink. "Gross," she responded. Leave that to skanky-looking actresses like Angelina Jolie.

Nate shrugged. He'd always thought carefully chosen, tiny tattoos in just the right places were insanely sexy. A little black cat between Blair's shoulder blades, for instance, would totally suit her. But before he had a chance to take the notion any further, Blair briskly changed the subject.

"Nate?" She nuzzled her face into his manly, perfect collarbone. "Do you think your parents would mind if I stayed—?" Before she could finish her sentence, the downstairs buzzer rang.

Nate's personal wing of the town house took up the entire top floor, necessitating his very own front door buzzer.

He rolled away from Blair and swung his feet to the floor.

"Yeah?" he called, pressing the button on the intercom.

"Delivery!" Jeremy Scott Tompkinson shouted in his hoarse stoner voice. "Hurry while it's still hot!"

Nate heard laughter and other voices in the background. Blair waited for him to tell them to get lost. Instead, he pressed the button to unlock the door and let them in.

"I should get dressed," Blair observed tersely. She slid out of bed and stomped into Nate's adjoining bathroom. How could he be smart enough to get into Yale, yet too dumb to understand that inviting his stoner friends up to their steamy love den would totally ruin the mood?

Not that Yale had accepted Nate because of his smarts: the school needed a few good lacrosse players. End of story.

At least Blair had an excuse to use the delicious L'Occitane sandalwood body shampoo the housekeeper stocked in Nate's shower. She towed herself off with a thick navy blue Ralph Lauren towel, slipped on her flimsy pink silk Cosabella underwear, zipped up her blue-and-white-seer-sucker Constance Billard School spring uniform skirt, and buttoned two of the six buttons on her white linen Calvin Klein three-quarter-sleeve blouse. Braless and barefoot, it was the perfect my-girlfriend-just-got-out-of-the-shower-and-would-you-please-leave? look. Hopefully Nate's friends would get the hint, make like bees, and fuck off. She tousled her damp hair with her fingers and pushed open the bathroom door.

"Bonjour!" A buxom, raven-haired, long-legged L'École girl greeted Blair from Nate's bed. Blair had met the girl before at parties. Her name was Lexus or Lexique or something equally annoying, a sixteen-year-old junior who'd done some modeling as a child in Paris and was now working on

perfecting the French hippie-slut look. Lexique, whose name was really Lexie, was wearing a lavender-and-mustard-yellow hand-dyed cotton wraparound dress that looked homemade but had actually been purchased at Kirna Zabete for four hundred and fifty dollars, and those ugly flat Pakistani sheepherder sandals from Barneys that everyone but Blair seemed to think were so cool this year. Lexie's face was makeup-free, and she cradled an acoustic guitar in her skinny arms. On the bed beside her was a Ziploc bag full of pot.

What a rebel. Most L'École girls never go anywhere without a pack of Gitanes, red lipstick, and heels.

"The boys are making bong hits on the roof," Lexie explained. She strummed her thumb across the guitar strings. "*Alors*, want to jam with me till they get back?"

Jam?

Blair wrinkled her nose with even more emphasis than she had at the thought of getting a tattoo. She was *so* not into the whole getting-high, playing-guitars-and-laughing-at-your-friends'-totally-stupid-stoned-observations scene, and she really didn't want to hang out with this Lexique girl, who obviously thought she was the coolest French girl in New York. She'd rather watch *Oprah* reruns on Oxygen in her cat-pee-soaked room while her delusional mom wept over baby alpacas.

Someone had stuck a stick of burning amber incense into the cork heel of one of Blair's new mint green Christian Dior espadrilles. She grabbed the stick of incense and jammed it into a porthole in one of Nate's beloved model sailboats on his desk. Then she laced up her shoes, buttoned a few more buttons on her blouse, and grabbed her vintage Gucci bamboo-handled tote bag. "Please tell Nathaniel that I've gone home," she instructed briskly.

“Peace!” Lexie saluted Blair with stoned gaiety. “*Au revoir!*” A tattoo of the sun, moon, and stars was printed on her shoulder blade.

Hence Nate’s sudden interest in tattoos?

Blair stomped down the stairs and let herself out onto Eighty-second Street. It felt like summer already. The sun was still two hours from setting, and the air smelled of fresh-cut grass from nearby Central Park, and suntan lotion from all the half-naked girls hurrying home to their apartments on Park Avenue. A gaggle of eleventh-grade St. Jude’s Nate-and-Jeremy-wannabes were hovering around the downstairs buzzer outside Nate’s town house. One of them had a guitar slung over his shoulder.

“*Bien sûr*. Come on up!” Blair heard Lexie call out to them over the intercom, as if she lived there.

Nate’s house seemed to draw all the stoner kids on the Upper East Side with some sort of spiritual magnetic pull. And Blair swore she didn’t mind—really, she didn’t—as long as she didn’t have to sit around watching them all *jam*. After all she and Nate had been through, Blair knew it was going to be different this time. She and Nate were together spiritually, and now physically, too, which meant she could leave him alone, feeling perfectly confident that he wouldn’t dream of cheating on her.

She carried on down Eighty-second street toward Fifth Avenue, checking her cell phone for a message from Nate at every corner. Obviously he’d call any second now. Like all possessive, aggressive, obsessive girls, she liked to think Nate didn’t have a life without her.

Then again, if he didn’t, she’d go completely nuts.