



gossipgirl.net

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

topics

sightings

your e-mail

post a question

hey people!

ho, ho, ho!

'Tis the season to be jolly. Fa la la la la, la la la la. Don we now our gay apparel . . . which just so happens to have been made for us by the little elves at Givenchy or YSL or Oscar de la Renta. Who are *we*, you ask? The residents of Manhattan's Golden Mile, of course – that glorious stretch of doorman buildings above Fifty-ninth Street and below Eighty-sixth. It's Christmastime, time to deck our sprawling Upper East Side penthouses with silver and gold baubles, twinkly lights, velvet bows, and chocolates imported from belle Paris. Here the holidays are always a little more sparkly, a little brighter, a little *better*. It's so, so good to be back.

While I'm not about to tell you where I've been for the past few months, I will tell you that there *is* life after high school. Yes, it finally happened: We went to college. During the past semester we encountered people who haven't seen us naked (yet), and who don't know our SAT scores; who don't remember that time we wet our pants in kindergarten, or when we got our ears pierced. We've learned a few new things, made a few new friends, and have even maybe met the loves of our lives. We've changed – hopefully for the better. And we're just as fabulous as always.

Take **B**, for instance. She's spending a perfect holiday with her perfect Yale boyfriend and his perfect family at their idyllic Vermont compound. That girl always had her eye on the prize. Speaking of prizes, what's **S** up to these days? No longer hounded by overeager,

fashion-conscious Constance Billard girls, she's now trailed by the paparazzi and a posse of wannabe movie starlets while she cools her Louboutins, waiting for her nomination for the SAG Awards. No matter where she is or what she does, **S** will always be one to watch.

Then there are those who've tried their darnedest to change: **N** has been sailing around the world for the last four months. But as we learned from John Donne in our freshman seminars, no man is an island. He'll be back – sooner rather than later, we hope. Then there's **D**, scratching out existential poetry in his black Moleskine notebook in the Pacific Northwest. It may look like a total lifestyle change, but he still insists on Folgers crystals instead of French press in the coffee capital of the US. He also spends every waking moment Skyping his shaven-headed, ultra-independent filmmaker girlfriend, **V**, who's at NYU and seems to almost have . . . *hair*. And friends?! And finally there's **C**, last seen with a pack of flannel-wearing, log-lifting, very rugged boys out in Nevada or Montana or someplace with no cities and lots of cattle. Is he into a new type, or has he gone through yet another reinvention? That man puts Madonna to shame.

Mistletoe and New Year's Eve are all about kissing, and something tells me there's going to be lots and lots of kissing this break. Lucky for you, I'll be here to report *everything* worth reporting after the holiday lights are unplugged and the pretty velvet ribbons have been untied. Let the reunion begin!

your e-mail

Q: Dear Gossip Girl,
I'm visiting my great aunt in New York City for the holidays, and I heard that Serena van der Woodsen lives here and you know everything about her. Are you her? Oh my God, if you're her, can you please send me an autograph? Or maybe hang out?
—IheartSvW

A: Dear Iheart,
While I prefer to live my life outside the spotlight, according to my sources, your heroine's out almost every night. You should be able to find her if you know where to look.
—GG

Q: Dear Gossip Girl,
My college dining hall only serves, like, deep-fried cheese balls and I may have gained some weight. Should I celebrate NYE with my high school friends, or pretend I have the flu?
—HittingtheBuffet

A: Dear HtheB,
While I'm not a dietician or a therapist, I can definitely say you're not alone. My advice: How you look is all about how you pull it off. Go out, wear your little black dress, and show off those curves. No one will even notice those tater tot pounds.
—GG

sightings

B on a train from **New Haven** to **Montpelier, Vermont**, looking very out of place in a sea of multicolored plaid flannel. **S** with three interchangeable anorexic dyed blond girls on the red carpet for a premiere. **V** and some friends from **NYU**, including a very hot hipster teaching assistant, at a film party in **Bushwick**. Is someone trying to get extra credit? **D** and his little sister, **J**, splitting a plate of gooey chocolate-chip pancakes at one of those horribly crowded diners on upper Broadway. **C** and his new horde of cowboy boot-clad dudes ordering

Cokes at the lounge at **Tribeca Star**. Should the hotel erect a hitching post?

still breaking all the rules

Technically you no longer live under your parents' roof. You've already indulged them with Scrabble and decorating gingerbread men that no one's going to eat. Now it's time to party. You can always reform after January 1st – that's what New Year's resolutions are for. So go out, have fun, and show your former besties and former flames just how much *better* you've become.

Besides, now that you know I'm watching, aren't you just dying to put on a show? Thought so.

You know you love me,

Gossip
GIRL

all b wants for christmas

‘You awake, Scout?’

Blair Waldorf awoke from a nap to the sight of her boyfriend, Pete Carlson, gazing down at her. Pete smiled his adorable, lopsided smile. His eyes were ocean blue and framed by strawberry blond lashes, to match his thick, floppy head of hair.

Blair threw the Black Watch-plaid duvet to the foot of the couch and discreetly checked for drool with her index finger. She *loved* being woken up by Pete, especially when he called her by an adorable nickname. Currently, it was Scout, because she’d directed him and his three older brothers to the best Douglas fir Christmas tree, deep in the woods of the Carlsons’ expansive Woodstock, Vermont, estate. Early this morning, they’d all opened presents underneath the magnificent tree. Pete had given Blair a pair of navy blue-and-tan North Face hiking boots with the promise that he’d bring her on some of his favorite trails when it got warmer. Blair had never been one for the great wide open, but Pete loved being outdoors, and suddenly the idea of sleeping under the stars with him at her side seemed almost romantic.

‘Of course I’m awake,’ Blair lied, sitting up and yawning. It was only noon, but Pete’s adorable-but-hyper nieces and nephews had woken everyone up to open presents at the ungodly hour of 5 a.m.

‘Good.’ Pete settled next to her on the worn navy blue couch, tenderly pushing Blair’s long bangs off her foxlike face. Her hair was a little shaggier than she liked, but she simply didn’t trust any of the hair salons in dingy New Haven. Besides, what were unkempt bangs when she was with a guy who truly loved her?

‘Have any dreams? You were making these little growls in your sleep. It was cute.’ Pete pulled the woolen blanket off the floor and draped it over their legs.

‘Oh.’ Blair frowned. She was *growling*?

In truth, she’d been having a lot of weird dreams lately. Last night, she’d woken up and thought she was at a sleepover at her old best friend Serena van der Woodsen’s house, only to find herself all alone in the dark, regal guest bedroom of the Carlsons’ oversize colonial.

Maybe it was just homesickness. After all, she didn’t have a home in New York anymore, she hadn’t seen Serena since *August*, and no one in her family was even in the US this week. Her father, Harold, was celebrating Christmas in Provence with his boyfriend, Giles, and their adopted twins. Her stepbrother, Aaron, was on a kibbutz in Israel. Her mother, stepfather, brother, Tyler, and baby sister, Yale, had moved to LA back in August, to a gigantic, tacky Pacific Palisades mansion that they were making even bigger and tackier. While the renovations were taking place, the four were traveling in the South Pacific, visiting the islands that Eleanor Rose, in a fit of pregnancy-induced mania last spring, had bought for each member of the family. Blair had been somewhat tempted to tag along, if only to see her baby sister, the least fucked-up member of her tragically absurd family.

That was all before she’d received the holiday card her mother had sent out. CELEBRATE THE WALDORF-ROSE FAMILY’S HOLIDAY MERGER had been written in gold script atop a photograph of her bald stepfather. Cyrus Rose was dressed in a

bright red velvet Santa suit, holding an elf-costumed infant Yale in one hand, a menorah in the other. Celebrating the holiday *merger* suddenly seemed a whole lot less appealing. And once she'd been invited to spend Christmas with the picture-perfect Carlsons, she felt it was her duty as a girlfriend to go.

'I was just dreaming about you. Us. I'm just so happy.' Blair sighed contentedly as she gazed into the blaze roaring in the quaint brick fireplace across the room. Outside, a thin blanket of snow covered the ground.

'Me too.' Pete ruffled her hair and pulled her face into his for a kiss.

'You taste nice,' Blair breathed, letting her body relax into Pete's muscular arms. She shrugged off her black Loro Piana cashmere cardigan so she was wearing only her peach Cosabella tank top.

It was funny how things worked out. When she arrived at Yale four months ago, Blair discovered that her incessantly perky roommate, Alana Hoffman, sang a cappella. *All* the time. Blair would wake up to Alana singing 'Son of a Preacher Man' to her collection of Gund teddy bears. Avoiding her room, Blair spent a lot of time in the library, where Pete was writing a paper for his magical realism class. Blair hadn't been able to so much as *look* at a guy ever since Nate Archibald, her high school boyfriend and the supposed love of her life, chose not to come to Yale with her, leaving her high and dry at Grand Central Station to head to college alone. But that day, spotting Pete's adorably rugged stubble, the half-smile he always wore, and the intense concentration in his dark blue eyes as he bent over his worn paperback book, Blair felt for the first time that there could be life after Nate. She and Pete had exchanged flirty glances, and finally he invited her for coffee.

They'd been inseparable ever since. In fact, since

Thanksgiving, Blair had been practically living with Pete – and his five gin-swilling, athletic roommates – in a comfortably shabby Chapel Street town house. At first, Blair had been nervous about living with so many guys, but she sort of liked having instantaneous brothers, and most of the time being the only girl in the room. Especially when they gave her free rein of the upstairs bathroom and didn't mind helping her with stats homework.

It was amazing how *easy* everything could be with Pete. For the first time in Blair's eighteen years, her life made sense. She loved her pre-law classes, lived in a house of boys who adored her, had a loving, handsome boyfriend, and had even found a surrogate family in the Carlsons.

One that didn't use the word *merger*.

For the past few days, they'd spent every waking hour with the family: Pete's former US senator dad, Chappy; his Boston debutante mom, Jane; his three older brothers, their wives, and assorted cherubic nephews and nieces whom Blair couldn't even try to keep straight. It sounded like a nightmare, but it was actually heavenly. Mr Carlson was barrel-chested and red-faced and told corny jokes in a way that made everyone crack up, and his mom would randomly recite Anne Sexton poetry at the dinner table without being drunk. The brothers were good-looking, friendly, and smart, their wives were polished and welcoming, and even the kids were polite. So far, it had been a perfect holiday.

And it was about to get even better. To celebrate the New Year, Chappy had booked the entire family at an exclusive five-star resort in Costa Rica. Obviously, Blair could do without the rain forest adventure part, but she'd heard the beaches were pristine, the sun was hot, and the villas had the most incredible mattresses.

Just then, there was a knock at the door. 'You kids decent?' Pete's older brother Jason called as he entered. He had the

same lanky frame as Pete. Tall, strawberry blond, and handsome, all four of the Carlson brothers – Everett, Randy, Jason, and Pete – looked like they could be quadruplets, even though there was a two-year age difference between each of them. A second-year law student at UPenn, Jason was the second youngest of the Carlson brothers. He was adorable, and Blair would've had a crush on him if she wasn't dating Pete.

At least she has a backup.

'We're playing charades. Carlson Christmas tradition. Your presence has been requested.'

'Do we have to?' Blair suppressed a groan. It was cute in theory, but they'd played charades, Pictionary, and Scrabble the last three days. Blair was extremely competitive, and it was exhausting simultaneously trying to win and to not appear like all she cared about was winning.

Maybe they should shake it up with some Truth or Dare.

'And guess who's requested you on his team again?' Jason smirked, flashing Blair the trademark white-toothed Carlson smile. 'Our dad loves you!'

'Yay!' Blair replied encouragingly, mustering her enthusiasm. She followed Pete through the wide arching hallway that led to the kitchen. The whole house was a contradiction: the walls were rough wood, but the polished wood floors were covered in antique Turkish carpets. In the kitchen, a large wood stove hunkered in the corner opposite two massive Sub-Zero refrigerators. Several overstuffed yellow chairs sat in front of a large dormer window, each one containing a different member of the family. Chappy, in a cream-colored cable-knit Aran Islands sweater, stood in front of the whole group, calling them to order.

'Scout!' he called gleefully as he spotted Blair and Pete.

'Hi, Mr Carlson.' Blair smiled warmly as Chappy clapped her on the shoulder.

'I already claimed you, so back off, boys,' he announced jovially to Pete's brothers, who all smiled politely back at her, even though Everett didn't bother to look up from his iPhone. 'I'm telling you, Scout, I don't know how I'm going to manage without you next week,' Chappy continued.

'Oh, well, I'm sure we can play on the beach or something,' Blair said. She blushed. The phrase sounded totally inappropriate when she said it out loud. 'Play charades on the beach,' she clarified quickly.

'Yeah, but what'll I do without my favorite teammate?' Chappy shook his head sorrowfully. 'No offense, Jane, but you cheat.'

'I do cheat, I'll be the first to admit it.' Jane Carlson had wheat blond hair cut in a sensible bob and was tall, with an athletic frame. She was wearing the same style sweater as her husband. 'I'm glad you're on the straight and narrow.' She winked at Blair.

But Blair was still stuck on the part of Chappy's sentence that implied she *wouldn't* be in Costa Rica with them. She'd bought five new Eres bikinis for the occasion. They made the most of the five pounds she'd gained from the gross food she'd been forced to eat on Yale's meal plan. '*Without me?*' Blair blurted stupidly.

'I mean, I'd bring you along, but we've got a saying in the Carlson family . . .' Chappy began, his blue eyes shining, as if he were about to deliver a stump speech. 'I believe, when it comes to vacations, in the "no ring, no bring" rule.'

'It's the Carlson curse.' Jason sighed, elbowing Blair in the ribs sympathetically. She stepped away. While it was true Blair had never *officially* been invited to Costa Rica, she'd been invited for Christmas, for God's sake. Wasn't that even more exclusive than a beach holiday? And why *not* invite her? After all, she'd brought Nate on her family vacations for years and it wasn't like she'd been married to him.

Except in her dreams.

‘Blair, we love you and we want you in our family for years to come, but I need to be a stickler on this,’ Chappy explained sympathetically, as if she were one of his constituents, arguing over some impossibly arcane rule. ‘I’ve raised four boys, and while they’ve behaved around you, honestly, these gentlemen cause more theatrics when it comes to ladies than the Yale School of Drama,’ he finished, shaking his head.

‘Maybe you could get together with your girlfriends and have a girls’ adventure!’ Pete’s sister-in-law Sarah piped up from the corner of the room, stroking her Lilly Pulitzer-patterned eight-months-pregnant belly. ‘I remember when I heard the Carlson rule, I had a great time with the Theta girls. We went to Cancún!’ A look of happy reminiscence crossed Sarah’s lightly tanned, heart-shaped face.

‘You did?’ Randy asked, shooting a look at Sarah. ‘I didn’t know that.’

‘Sorry, son!’ Chappy clapped Pete on the back. ‘Sorry, Scout!’

Blair narrowed her eyes at a painting that hung over the fireplace, of a ship in what looked like an exceptionally violent storm. What a boring, random piece of art to hang in a house. Suddenly she hated her stupid nickname. *Scout?*

Out would have been more appropriate.

‘Blair, I’m sorry,’ Pete said simply. ‘I thought you understood. . . .’

‘What? I knew I wasn’t coming,’ Blair lied, smiling fakely. Her stomach was churning wildly. For a brief second, she wanted to excuse herself, run to the second-floor bathroom, and puke everything she’d eaten for the past five days.

‘Blair, darling, here’s your hot chocolate. I made sure to put some extra marshmallows in there.’ Jane pushed the steaming ceramic mug into Blair’s hands. ‘Won’t you sit down?’ She gestured to one of the comfortable overstuffed forest green chairs.

‘Thanks.’ Blair nodded. She squared her shoulders and turned to the waiting Carlson clan. No way was she going to let the Brady Bunch see her sweat. ‘You all ready to play?’ She forced herself to smile, a plan already forming.

‘Maybe I *will* have a wild girls’ weekend,’ she whispered in Pete’s ear. ‘I haven’t been to New York all year, except those two weekends with you, and those don’t count, since we never even left the hotel.’ His face fell as he no doubt pictured all the raucous fun she’d be having without him. Blair raised an eyebrow challengingly. After all, she was a woman. A Yale woman. She had places to go.

And more important games to play.

*make new friends, but keep the
old . . .*

‘This came from the man at the other end of the bar,’ the skinny bartender-slash-model wearing a cheesy Ed Hardy T-shirt said as he proffered a glass of Veuve Clicquot.

‘Thanks.’ Serena van der Woodsen glanced down the long, dark oak bar of Saucebox, the new lounge in the just-opened T Hotel on Thompson Street. Breckin O’Dell, a handsome but boring actor she vaguely remembered meeting a few times, held up his own glass of champagne and saluted her. Serena nodded, brought the flute to her lips, and took a healthy sip, even though she preferred vodka.

‘Oh my God, you should totally date him. His agent has ridiculous connections.’ Amanda Atkins yanked on the sleeve of Serena’s black Row scoop-neck jersey dress in excitement. ‘Can we get some shots down here?’ she called to the bartender. Serena smiled sheepishly. Amanda was an eighteen-year-old recent LA transplant best known for her role in a dorky sitcom about a fashionista girl from Paris who moves to a farm in Tennessee to live with her redneck uncle Hank. Recently, though, she’d been cast in an indie film about snowboarders who dropped acid, and was trying to break free from her good-girl reputation.

Another shot and she’s almost there.

'Maybe,' Serena responded unconvincingly to Amanda's comment about Breckin. She stared at the clear bubbles fizzing to the top of her glass as if they held the secrets to the universe. If she looked around her, she'd see tons of Breckin O'Dell look-alikes with gel in their hair and fitted pressed shirts from Thomas Pink. They buzzed around Serena, Amanda, and her other two actress friends, Alysia and Alison. They called themselves the three A's, even though Alysia's real name was actually Jennifer.

The three A's were admittedly a little too into material things, but they were also goofy and fun and never turned down a party. Usually Serena had a blast hanging out with them, but tonight, she felt a little . . . off. It was two days after Christmas and her parents had just left for their villa in St Barts, while her brother, Erik, was already back in Melbourne, Australia, where he was spending his sophomore year abroad. It wasn't like Serena wanted to spend New Year's Eve with her family, but she also didn't like waking up in their huge Fifth Avenue apartment alone. She downed her champagne in one gulp, telling herself that she just needed to have fun.

After all, she is the expert.

'Hey, you're that farm chick!' one spiky-haired brunet guy stuttered, not looking Amanda in the eye. He wore a pink and white striped button-down and his teeth were Chiclet white.

'Yes,' Amanda sighed. 'I am. But I have to stand over here now.' She took two steps away as Alysia and Alison snorted in laughter. Serena offered the guy a sympathetic smile. Even though she was beautiful, she was never mean.

An infuriating combination.

'God, you'd think Knowledge would know not to let guys like that in. Did you see his hair? It was, like, sprayed on.' Amanda flipped her long blond extensions over her shoulder as she named the beefy bouncer whose job was to keep Saucebox

as exclusive as possible, even though, to Serena, it felt exactly the same as every other bar she'd been to recently.

'Serena?'

Serena whirled around, ready to have another one of those *so what are you working on now?* conversations with someone in the industry she'd probably met once. Instead, she saw a familiar, smiling face that immediately took her back in time, and eighty blocks north.

'Oh my God, Iz!' Serena squealed excitedly. She slid off the smooth oak bar stool and threw her arms around Isabel Coates, a fellow Constance Billard alum who'd gone to Rollins College down in Florida. Her skin was deeply tanned and her thick dark shoulder-length hair had been straightened. Her chest looked suspiciously larger than it did the last time Serena saw her. She automatically looked over Isabel's shoulder, sure she'd see Kati Farkas, Isabel's BFF and constant wingwoman. Isabel and Kati had done everything together since the fourth grade. Kati had even turned down admission to Princeton so she and Isabel wouldn't have to be separated. But instead of Kati, a girl with a ski-jump nose and chin-length straight brown hair stood next to Isabel. She wore a tight black sleeveless satin dress and looked like she could be Kati's slightly older sister. But Kati didn't have sisters.

'This is my girlfriend, Casey,' Isabel announced proudly. She readjusted her white Marc Jacobs tote strap on her shoulder.

Girlfriend girlfriend? Serena noticed Isabel's hand intertwined with the girl's.

'We met in a women's studies class.' Isabel smiled adoringly at Casey.

There's her answer.

'This is Serena van der Woodsen. We went to school together,' Isabel explained, her hand now resting lightly on Casey's back.

‘Nice to meet you, Casey.’ Serena smiled, holding out her hand to the tall girl, who took it gingerly.

‘Nice to meet you too. I haven’t seen any of your movies,’ Casey announced bluntly.

As if anyone asked.

‘Oh, that’s okay. How’s Kati?’ Serena asked Isabel, easing back onto her stool. She couldn’t help but wonder if Isabel was really gay, or just going through the fashionable bisexual phase of college she’d heard about.

Isabel sighed and shook her head. ‘She has this, like, football player boyfriend and is pledging a sorority that wears pink sweat suits to class. It’s awful. Casey and I pretty much do our own thing. But what about *you*? I saw the movie. You were pretty good,’ Isabel allowed.

‘Thanks.’ Serena blushed. She hoped Isabel really meant it and wasn’t just being polite. ‘Things are okay. Just working a lot. We’re filming a sequel to *Breakfast at Fred’s* that’s coming out in the summer, so that’s fun. . . .’ Serena trailed off. Even though she’d been on the cover of the October issue of *Vanity Fair*, part of her felt stuck. She’d come home from her big premiere, thinking it would be the greatest night of her life, to her same pink childhood bedroom in her parents’ sprawling Upper East Side penthouse. If possible, she almost felt *less* grown-up than she had before graduating, especially since she now had an agent and a publicist who told her exactly what to wear, what to say, and who to be seen with. The real world felt a lot different than she’d imagined.

‘A sequel sounds great!’ Isabel cooed. ‘Anyway, I was just showing Casey all of our old haunts. Remember hours trying things on at Barneys, and then so much time just eating spaghetti and meatballs upstairs at Fred’s? That all feels like so long ago now,’ she mused, nuzzling her head against Casey’s. The guys standing around them were all drooling over the lesbian-chic couple.

'It does,' Serena agreed wholeheartedly. Just a matter of months ago, she and Blair and Kati and Isabel would meet before school to smoke Merits on the Met steps and imagine their lives in college. Now, Blair was pre-law at Yale, Isabel was a lesbian, Kati was running around with pink Greek letters on her ass, and Serena was trying to make a go of it in the movies.

'So, have you seen anyone yet?' Isabel asked.

'No.' Serena shook her head. For her, only two people really mattered: Blair and Nate. She and Blair had kept in touch since Blair headed up to New Haven, and once Serena had sent Blair a package full of Wolford stockings and black-and-white cookies, in a bow-tied Barneys bag – some of Blair's favorite New York things. Blair had reciprocated with a stuffed bulldog wearing a Yale T-shirt. It was sitting on Serena's dresser, next to a silver-framed picture of the two of them wearing enormous hats at a Kentucky Derby party sophomore year. They'd send e-mails and texts, but never anything long or involved. It was fine, though. Blair and Serena were the type of friends who could go for weeks and even, one time, months without speaking, then pick up right where they left off.

As for Nate . . . Serena hadn't talked to him since he left, to sail the world for a year. He had left her crushed, and she wondered if she'd ever see him again. But she didn't want to think about that right now.

Or ever.

'Are you going to Chuck's New Year's party?' Isabel asked, draining the rest of her Grey Goose and cranberry. 'I mean, I know he's, like, such a misogynist, but I figured, you can only protest so much, you know? I prepared Casey.'

'Wait, Chuck is back from military school?' Serena asked, suddenly eager to hear *everything*. She hadn't thought about Chuck – with his sketchy history, his trademark monogrammed scarf, or his questionable sexuality – since graduation. But the

last she'd heard, after getting rejected from all twelve schools he'd applied to, he'd gone to some tiny underground, remote-country-boot-camp men's college. Of course her parents saw Chuck's parents socially, but they never mentioned what he was doing. It was an unspoken rule on the Upper East Side that parents didn't discuss their unsuccessful children.

'He must be.' Isabel shrugged. 'The party's on. I saw Laura Salmon at City Bakery this morning and she told me she was hanging out with Rain Hoffstetter at some lame Constance alum tea party that Mrs. M organized. Thank God we missed that. But, anyway, I guess she talked to Chuck. I don't know. It's at his place at the Tribeca Star. But I guess since you're a movie star and all now, you probably have to host some MTV countdown special or something, right?'

'Well . . .' Serena trailed off. In truth, she already had an invite to a New Year's party at Thaddeus Smith's West Village loft. Thaddeus had been her *Breakfast at Fred's* costar and was a true friend. But he wouldn't mind if she stopped by to say hi and then went off to Chuck's party. Maybe seeing old friends was all she needed to pull herself out of her mood.

Alysia tapped Serena urgently on the shoulder. 'Let's go someplace else. There's no one fun here,' she pronounced as Amanda and Alison nodded their bobbleheads in agreement.

'Please?' Alison whined. She stuck out her Stila-glossed lower lip and whined like a shih tzu.

Serena nodded before turning to Isabel. 'I'll see you at Chuck's,' she promised. She smiled faintly as she trailed the three A's toward the door. How could she *not* see her old high school crowd? While she might not have been thinking of them all that much recently, it wasn't like she'd forgotten them.

And they certainly haven't forgotten her.

a trip can't last forever, even for n

Nate Archibald's elbow hit a beam, and he woke up with a start. His tanned, athletic frame was wedged in the crow's nest of the *Belinda*, the ship he called home.

Nate was traveling the world with his mentor and friend Chips. Chips had been Nate's father's mentor way back when he was in the navy, and for the past four months they'd followed the wind and the stars and the moon, aided only by Chips's antique silver compass. It was amazing. Nate had always been a sailor, and had even taken his father's boat, the *Charlotte*, up and down the eastern seaboard with his girlfriend, Blair, last June.

Doesn't he mean *ex-girlfriend*?

Nate rubbed the sleep out of his glittering green eyes and yawned. They were somewhere in the Bahamas, but it felt light-years away from the Upper East Side. Maybe it was the tropical air and the nautical living, but everything about his old life seemed far away. Sometimes, he'd try to remember a specific event – the first time he'd bought pot from the pizza dude on Lex by asking for two slices with extra oregano, the time he'd stolen the *Charlotte* and spent a weekend with Anthony and Charlie, doing bong hits and eating Oreos, cruising toward Bermuda at half a mile an hour – but the scenes were always fuzzy. It was like remembering an old movie, where you could recall random moments, but not the beginning or ending.

Nate leaned back against the rough-hewn beams. There were some memories, though, that he replayed almost every night. In the moments before the subtle rocking of the ocean lulled him to sleep, he pictured Blair, and Serena van der Woodsen, his other best friend and the girl he'd lost his virginity to. Blair cheesily posing in front of the polar-bear exhibit at the zoo; Serena with her blond head tipped back, laughing hysterically at a joke only she found funny; Blair in front of Tiffany, her favorite place on earth, doing her best Audrey Hepburn impression. Serena splashing around in the Venus fountain in his backyard, looking like the goddess she was. He wondered if they ever thought about him.

If not, there are plenty of girls who *do*.

He knew they probably weren't *pinning* for him. In fact, they probably hated him. He loved them both, and of course he'd never been able to choose between them. This past summer, he'd even cheated on Blair with Serena. Finally, when he couldn't decide whether to go to Yale with Blair or stay in the city with Serena, he'd chosen to travel the world with Chips. He'd been so confused. So conflicted. So afraid to make a choice, in case he chose wrong. But now, he felt different.

He even *looked* different. Months of sailing had tanned his skin a dark bronze color, and his golden brown hair was now almost platinum-blond in places. His face was angular and hardened and a blondish-brown beard covered his chin. The scruff made his green eyes stand out that much more. He hadn't smoked any pot since they'd left, not by choice, but still, it felt good. His head felt lighter, clearer somehow.

Nate climbed down the crow's nest onto the polished wood deck. It was just after sunrise and the sky was suffused with a pinkish tint. 'Hello?' he called out. 'Chips?'

'Nathaniel!' Chips called from the boat's stern. He was coiling a mass of rope, a frown etched on his weather-beaten

face. With his white linen trousers, navy windbreaker, and shock of white hair, Chips looked like a tall stocky sea captain on the menu of a lobster restaurant. But beneath his stern veneer, he was actually a pretty cool guy, especially after he'd had his evening tumbler of scotch.

'Take a look.' Chips passed the binoculars over to Nate. He could just make out land, fuzzy in the distance. 'By New Year's Eve, we'll be at the Breakers,' Chips declared, almost to himself.

'I'm sorry?' Nate asked. Wasn't the Breakers a resort in Palm Beach? He was ready to stop somewhere, make a couple calls back home, sure. He'd thrown his phone overboard when he'd made the decision to sail with Chips back in August, so he'd only been able to call home occasionally, when they stopped at various islands. He hadn't even been able to wish his parents a Merry Christmas. Still, he'd been hoping their next stop would be somewhere a little more adventurous, like Costa Rica. He'd always wanted to go there.

Join the club.

'So we're stopping in Palm Beach? And where to after that?' Nate asked. Ever since they'd left, he'd trusted Chips to guide them. But he was kind of wondering what Chips's grand plan was.

Instead of answering his question, Chips pulled himself back up into a standing position. He dusted off the thighs of his white linen pants. 'When I was your age, I was in the navy. Didn't have the luxury to think about how I wanted to live my life, just had to make sure I got the chance to live it another day. You know what I'm saying, son?' he asked gruffly. His burry Scottish accent reminded Nate of Mel Gibson as William Wallace in the movie *Braveheart*, rallying the clansmen before launching into an epic battle.

'Right.' Nate nodded, even though he wasn't really sure what Chips was talking about. 'So after Palm Beach . . . ?'

‘After Palm Beach, nothing. It’s back to New York for you, sonny. It’s time. I’ve shown you the world. Now you’ve got to live in it.’

Nate felt rooted to the deck of the ship. He’d known he’d have to go back eventually, but this felt very *sudden*.

Just like how two girls might have felt when a certain boy decided to sail off into the sunset – alone?

Nate slid down on the yellow-wood-lacquered floorboards of the boat, trying to wrap his mind around everything. He was going back to New York. Back to his old life. Back to Blair and Serena and his father nagging about what a disappointment he was. *This* was Chips’s grand plan?

‘Stand up,’ Chips ordered. He put down the binoculars and began winding a mass of rope around his arm.

Nate hastily got to his feet. ‘You need help with that?’ he asked, noticing Chips struggle as he tried to reduce one of the sails.

‘No, I’m fine,’ his captain responded curtly. Nate nodded, even though he’d noticed that Chips had been dragging his bad leg more than ever. ‘Listen, Nathaniel,’ Chips said, more gently than before. ‘These last few months have been some of the best of my life . . . but I’m getting old. It’s Palm Beach season for me. A man needs more than the sea and the sky to survive.’ He tied the rope into a perfect knot, as if to punctuate his speech. ‘But for you . . . you can’t spend the rest of your life sailing away from everything difficult. It’s for your own good.’

Nate grimaced. Even though Chips was a philosophical, scotch-drinking old geezer, he always seemed to be able to read Nate’s thoughts. And right now, Nate was thinking about the choice that had faced him for too many years.

‘You’re worried about those two girls of yours, I know it. The ones who keep falling at your feet despite your boneheaded moves? The ones you can’t decide between, as if you’re facing some life-or-death choice?’

Nate nodded miserably. In two sentences, Chips had pretty much summarized the crisis he'd been struggling with since he was fifteen.

'Well, I'll tell you this. You'll know when you know. And you've got to figure it out on your own. I'm not babysitting your balls anymore.' Chips nodded definitively upward at the sails, pleased with his handiwork. 'Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to have my morning tea. You've got a day to figure it all out.' He gave Nate a parting wink, and disappeared down to the galley, leaving him with just the sky and the endless sea for company.

'Thanks,' Nate muttered. He gripped the bow of the ancient but sturdy ship, feeling the salty wind on his face. Maybe Chips was right. He'd had some time away. Some time to think and be on his own, to see the world and become a man. He couldn't just sail forever.

It was time to go back and decide what to really do with his life. And when he saw Blair and Serena, he'd be ready to choose. Maybe it was best not to overthink it. When he saw them, he'd just *know*. There was no time like the present. He was ready.

Okay, but are they ready for *him*?