

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new
books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Bond Girl

Written by Erin Duffy

Published by Harper

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

ERIN DUFFY

Bond Girl

HARPER

This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the
work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is
entirely coincidental.

Harper
An imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

This paperback edition 2012
1

First published in the USA by
HarperCollins Publishers 2012

Copyright © Erin Duffy 2012

Erin Duffy asserts the moral right to be
identified as the author of this work

ISBN: 978-0-00-746111-0

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior
permission of the publishers.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not,
by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or
otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent
in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it
is published and without a similar condition including this
condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.



MIX
Paper from
responsible sources
FSC® C007454

FSC™ is a non-profit international organisation established to
promote the responsible management of the world's forests.

Products carrying the FSC label are independently certified
to assure consumers that they come from forests that are managed
to meet the social, economic and ecological needs of present and
future generations, and other controlled sources.

Find out more about HarperCollins and the environment at
www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

For my family.

For my brothers: Scott, James, and Christopher. Thank you for always making me laugh, hard. But especially for my parents. For my father, my idol, who always encouraged me to go to the Street, a life I still don't think I deserve but am so proud to have. And for my mother, my mentor, who quietly supports even the worst of decisions (and believe me, there are many) and who always thought I should write. I guess you both had a point.

How I love you all.

BOND GIRL

prologue

The Giant Adult Sandbox from Hell

I am too old for this.
Click.

At 6:00 a.m., my clock radio turns on, and music blares from the speakers, shattering the blissful morning quiet, the latest Beyoncé song reminding me that the weekend is over. Waking up on Mondays is bad enough, but waking up on Monday when you have a really bad hangover, the kind of hangover that makes your toenails hurt, is damn near impossible. Half in a coma, I dig around under the mass of pillows crammed against the dark green wood of my headboard, searching for the radio's remote control to snooze for another blessed ten (maybe twenty) minutes. Mercifully, my hand makes contact with the remote somewhere in the upper right-hand corner of my bed, and I wave it in the direction of the nightstand, silently begging for the room to fall silent. That is to say, as silent as a third-floor apartment in Manhattan can ever really be.

A lot of people dream about waking up in New York City. Hell,

Sinatra wrote an entire song about it. Unless of course you are *trying* to sleep, in which case New York is where very tired, cranky, hungover people go to die. If you're like me and decided to drown your Sunday-night anxiety in a bottle and a half of pinot noir and a pack of Parliaments while watching *Law and Order* reruns until 1:00 a.m., New York City, at six in the morning, is undeniably, irrefutably hell on earth. I probably should have realized when I rented my shoebox-sized apartment in the West Village for \$4,000 a month that having a third-floor window overlooking Greenwich Avenue with a direct line of sight to a firehouse did not bode well for REM sleep. Since I moved here the concept of sleeping late—of sleeping in general—is pretty much one I have long since forgotten.

I begin to doze off again, when the damn radio clicks back on. Now the annoyingly perky DJ announces time, traffic, and weather. “Better get going people. It’s another hazy, hot, and humid day in the Big Apple.” Clearly, the DJ didn’t handle his Sunday-night blues the same way I did. Or maybe he just liked his job and didn’t find excessive Sunday-night boozing necessary. I hear that some people have it that lucky.

I give myself “the pep talk,” the same speech I give myself every morning before heading to work at Cromwell Pierce, one of Wall Street’s biggest powerhouses. *You can do it, Alex. You can handle it. You will not let him break you.* Talking to myself has become a habit since I started working on Wall Street. If this pace keeps up, by the time I hit thirty I’ll be certifiably insane.

Much to my horror, I realize the industrial-size bottle of Advil I’ve been working my way through over the last six months is in the bathroom and, since I’m pretty sure my head is about to explode, I have no choice but to get up. I swing my legs out of bed, my feet hitting the cool wood floor. In minutes, I’ll be shoving my battered toes into any number of pairs of four-inch heels that make my twenty-four-year-old knees feel like they belong to a sixty-year-old woman. I shuffle to the bathroom, flick the switch on the wall, and experience a full assault on my eyeballs courtesy of the fluorescent lightbulbs lining the top of

the medicine cabinet. I groan as I try to shield my contracting pupils from the blinding light, blinking until the blue dots disappear and I can actually focus on my reflection in the mirror. Blindness would be a welcome reprieve. Surveying the damage after a night of heavy drinking was never this bad in college, and for some reason, only two years after graduation, I look much more haggard than I did after a similar night back at the University of Virginia. I decide to blame the lightbulbs.

Gazing into the mirror, I discover I must have slept facedown in the same position all night long, because the sheets have left creases on one side of my face that I fear may need to be surgically removed. My long, dark hair is tangled and it will take me an hour to comb the knots out if I'm lucky. My usually rosy complexion looks sallow and dry, and there are dark, puffy circles under my green eyes. I neglected to brush my teeth before face-planting; this morning they're blue and my lips are crusted with a deep ruby stain, which, to tell the truth, would make a really nice lipstick shade. I wonder if the people at Sephora could come up with a way to turn your lips this color that didn't involve alcohol poisoning.

"Just five more minutes," I mutter to myself as I lean against the shower wall, allowing the scalding hot water to blast my half-asleep body. I begin to wonder if humans could sleep standing up, you know, like cows. It occurs to me that if we can't, falling asleep in the shower could very well lead to my being found dead and alone two days from now, after the water in my flooded bathroom seeped through the floor into the apartment below. Juan, the super, would force open my door to discover two empty wine bottles, an overflowing ashtray, a carton of chicken lo mein on the coffee table, and my naked, pruned body in the bathtub.

Oh no. No, no, no, no. I will *not* be written up in the *New York Post* as the girl who drowned from a hangover in her own tub. I limp out of the shower and get dressed in khaki pants and a white button-down shirt. I tie a bright scarf around my once narrow waist, figuring that if I'm well accessorized maybe no one in the office will notice I'm still drunk. The constant drinking has made my clothes a bit too snug for comfort, one

of many unwanted side effects of working on the Street. Joy. I search for the usual necessities: iPhone, wallet, and keys.

One of the worst things about not remembering going to bed the night before is trying to locate all the pieces of your life the following morning. I finally find my iPhone behind a sofa cushion, and for reasons that I can't fathom, my wallet is in my fridge next to yet another bottle of wine. Yet for the life of me, I can't find my keys. Anywhere. And my apartment, as I previously mentioned, is not large. I glance at the filthy, overflowing ashtray on my coffee table. I know I didn't have cigarettes in my apartment when I came home yesterday, because I quit smoking last Thursday. Which means I went down to the twenty-four-hour bodega at some point last night . . . which means I had to have my keys to get back in. (At least the alcohol hasn't done any permanent damage to my powers of deductive reasoning.) It doesn't take me long to figure out where I had left them, and when I throw open my front door my suspicions are confirmed. This is why I insisted on living in a building with a full-time doorman. Without one, I probably would have been killed in my own bed last night, and my face would've been splattered across the front page of the *Post* anyway. There are no small victories in life.

I scoop my gym bag and my newspapers off the floor with one hand, scurry out of my apartment, and hail a cab. I scan the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*. The headlines chronicle yet another massive investment bank going under, the stock market declining the most in a single session since the 1920s, and more layoffs being announced throughout the financial sector. This isn't helping my headache. Working on a fixed-income trading floor, the government bond desk specifically, has been torturous lately. Treasury bonds are the safest place in the world to put your money (except for under your mattress), so we've been mind-numbingly busy as everyone's been selling stocks and other securities in exchange for bonds guaranteed by the government. The last few months have been incredibly stressful. I promise, if you polled a random sample of Wall Street employees, the majority would admit to get-

ting drunk more frequently these days. (Though I don't know how many of them would admit to finding their wallets in the refrigerator the next morning. But they lie.) I vaguely remember the way things were just a few months ago, before everything got really bad, before we all needed to drink ourselves to sleep. It didn't use to be like this. I check my phone quickly and notice that I have missed calls from my two best friends, Annie and Liv. I don't bother listening to their voice mails, because I already know what they say. They're well aware my mental state isn't good. They also know the liquor store delivers.

Twenty minutes later I hop out of the cab and race through a set of massive gold doors, the name Cromwell Pierce proudly engraved in the marble lintel. I try to walk lightly across the floor so that the *click clack click* of my heels won't reverberate throughout the cavernous lobby as I make my way to the escalator. I repeat my new morning mantra as I walk:

Click, clack, click. A few hours, you can handle anything for a few hours. Easy.

Click, clack, click. Maybe he won't be in today.

Click, clack, click. Of course he's in today. He's always in. You're fucked, Alex. You're royally fucked.

I bow my head and stare at the metal slats on the escalator as I ride it to the second floor. As I step off, I'm immediately confronted by security guards and place my bags on the conveyor belt running through the x-ray machine. I hate the x-ray machines with a passion. One morning I had a thong in my bag (for reasons that I'd rather not recount at the moment), and that was the one day the security guard made me empty the entire contents of my tote in front of everyone, so he could ensure that I wasn't carrying some sort of concealed weapon. Security on Wall Street is second only to the White House. I'm not complaining. All I'm saying is that sometimes you don't want your purse x-rayed. That's all.

The elevator is packed, and I find myself standing next to two middle-aged men in perfectly pressed pants and pastel polo shirts. I don't know who cast the movie *Wall Street*, but whoever it was never took a lap around Cromwell Pierce. If any of my colleagues even remotely

resembled Charlie Sheen or Michael Douglas, coming to work would be a whole lot more enjoyable. As I stare blankly at the *Journal*, I listen to their conversation. Casually, the man in the blue polo says to the guy in the yellow polo, “You out east this weekend?”

“Yeah, Southampton. Played Shinnecock on Saturday.”

“Ah, beautiful course. How’d you play?”

“Had some trouble off the tee, but pretty well, thanks. What about you?”

“Westhampton. Spent some time with the family before my son heads off to school this weekend.”

“Oh, that’s nice. Where?”

“Brown. He’s going to play lacrosse.”

“Fantastic. What position does he play? My son’s a sophomore at Harvard.”

“Harvard, huh? That’s terrific. He’s a defenseman. Yours?”

“Middie.”

“We’ll have to go to a game together sometime, cheer the kids on, you know?”

“Definitely. Can’t wait for the season to start. The Bears versus the Crimson will be a great game.”

Both men nod in agreement. Of course, that is only the surface conversation. Underneath the polite banter, which you can decode if you’ve spent enough time in the Business, the real conversation went something like this:

“I belong to a more expensive golf club than you do, which means I make more money than you do.”

“Screw you and your exclusive, world-famous club. My kid’s going to play lacrosse in the Ivy League.”

“Oh, you think that makes you special? My kid *already* plays in the Ivy League.”

“That’s great. If your kid is a middie, that means he’s smaller and weaker than mine. Hopefully, they can match up against each other and my son can level yours out on the field.”

“We will never, ever, talk to each other at games. I will pretend I have never seen you before in my life.”

“Harvard’s for fags.”

“Brown’s for pussies.”

News flash: I work in the giant adult sandbox from hell.

I haven’t always felt this way. Just last year I would have found that conversation amusing. I would have cared what was going on in the markets. I would have been excited to come to work. But 2008 has sucked on every level imaginable.

Leatherface and Starfish Ted

It's no surprise that I ended up working in an industry ruled by men. I always loved playing with the boys. I loved to get dirty, skin my knees, and catch frogs. I would rather have tossed a baseball with the three Callahan boys down the street than played hopscotch with my little sister, Cat, in the driveway. My parents laughed when I came home covered in mud, an interesting counterpoint to my quiet sister, who wanted nothing to do with any physical activity that didn't involve a jump rope or thick colored chalk. At first, the Callahans didn't mind having me around, and why would they? I was an easy opponent, someone who helped reinforce their developing, fragile male egos; until the day that I hit a home run, a soaring, fast, uncatchable hit to right field (otherwise known as the hedges that lined the Callahans' front lawn). I ran the bases fast, my knobby knees knocking each other. When I hit home plate, marked by a kitchen towel, I jumped up and down savoring my victory, loving that I had managed to score against boys who were older, bigger, faster, and stronger. Benny Callahan, at ten, two years older than

me and the strongest of the group, didn't like it. In fact, like most boys (and later men), he hated that a girl had challenged him—and won.

"I don't want to play with a stupid girl. Why don't you go home and play with your dolls?"

"Don't be such a sore loser!" I cried. It was my first lesson that success, small or large, comes with consequences.

"Go home! Your parents probably don't even want you. That's why you have a boy's name. My mom told me your parents wish you were a boy."

"That's not true! Alex is a girl's name!"

"Alexandra is a girl's name. Alex is a boy's name. Your parents don't like you and neither do we!"

I had never thought about the fact that my name was just plain Alex, not Alexandra. Ouch.

"I hate you!" I yelled, the joy of my victory vanquished in a flash. I sprinted off as the last of the evening sun disappeared over the horizon, arriving just as my dad returned home from work.

"What's wrong?" my mother asked, as she hugged me. "Did you get hurt playing baseball?"

"No," I sobbed, pulling out of her grasp. "Benny said that I have a boy's name, and that you didn't name me Alexandra because you wished I was a boy!" I wailed loudly, the way an eight-year-old does when faced with the reality that her parents don't love her.

My father knelt on the floor, as if somehow matching my size would better enable him to console me. "That's not true," he reassured me. "Your name is Alex because it's unique, just like you. There will be a million Alexandras running around, but there's only one Alex."

"I don't believe you!" I sobbed hysterically and ran out of the room. How was I going to live in this house until I graduated from high school with parents who didn't want me? My parents found me in the living room, curled up in a ball on the couch.

"Hey, would you like to come to work with me tomorrow?" my dad asked.

“I can’t,” I said. “I have school.”

“Well, how about tomorrow you don’t go to school? Come to work with me instead, and we’ll spend the day together. Would you like that?”

I looked at Mom for confirmation that I could miss school and spend the day in New York City with my dad. She smiled and nodded.

“Really?” I asked my dad. Until then, all I knew of my father’s job was what I saw when I went with my mom to pick him up at the train station. I would sit in the backseat of the car and wait for the train to pull in. When it did, I’d watch dozens of men wearing suits, ties, and trench coats briskly exit the train and descend the stairs into the parking lot. A few women got off the train, too, wearing skirts and matching jackets. They carried soft leather briefcases and wore socks and sneakers with their skirts. They all looked so *important*. I couldn’t wait until the day I was able to ride the train with the grown-ups and carry a briefcase of my very own. Of course, I could do without the sneakers and the socks. I wiped my eyes with my sleeve. “Can we take the train into the city? The one you take every day?”

“You bet. We can ride the train in the morning and you can come see where I work. Then we can go to lunch and to FAO Schwarz. How does that sound?”

Sounded good to me. Who needs the Callahan boys when you have new toys?

It became a ritual. My dad would take me to his office a few times a year, even before there was an official “Take Our Daughters to Work” Day. On days when the markets closed early and he wasn’t busy, he’d allow me to come see his office and watch grown-ups at work. We’d take the train from Connecticut to Grand Central Station, and then ride the subway downtown to Wall Street where he was a banker at Sterling Price. I’d sit at his desk in his office and play with all his computers. He had two different keyboards, more phone lines than I had friends to call, and I had access to unlimited candy and cookies from the cafeteria downstairs. From the first time I witnessed the glamour of the Wall Street machine, I was hooked. Downtown buzzed like no place I had

ever been; it was and is the economic epicenter of the universe. Everyone walked with purpose: you never saw people casually strolling or window-shopping along the twisted streets south of Canal. Down there people were busy. Time was money, and money was all anyone thought about: how to make it, how to keep it, how to make sure someone else didn't have more of it than you did. It was electrifying.

"Hurry up, Alex. You'll get run over down here if you don't pay attention!" My dad would wave for me to follow him, weaving in and out of the surging crowds as I tried to keep my eyes on his navy suit jacket. Men in the Financial District wore their pinstripes with pride and a swagger—they were the Yankees of Lower Manhattan. Everything and everyone I saw downtown looked expensive: men wearing fine Italian suits, silk Hermès ties, shiny leather shoes. The first time I saw the New York Stock Exchange in person it was like seeing the Parthenon. The American flag hung proudly from one of the many Ionic columns, the building stretching the length of an entire city block. I was only eight years old, but I already felt like I was part of something special. I felt sorry for the people who would never get close enough to know what they were missing, and so amazingly lucky that I wasn't one of them. I decided to make sure that that never changed.

My father had no idea those days would alter the course of my life.

"The Business" was what my father and all the other Wall Street guys called the finance industry, as if there was no other profession on the face of the earth. And, to them, there wasn't. The very first time I went to his office, I knew this was what I wanted to do. My parents always joked that I had a lot of energy, sometimes too much. My teachers commented that I talked too much in class, that I ran in the hallways, that I had to learn the difference between my "inside" and my "outside" voice. I always found it all difficult to do, no matter how hard I tried. I could never seem to harness my energy, and I worried that it was something that would end up being a problem for me when I grew up. But everyone ran in the hallways at Sterling Price. Furthermore, from what I could tell, there was no such thing as an inside voice, and all anyone

seemed to do all day was talk on the phone or to each other. It was like a giant adult playground, where people could do everything I was always told not to do. It was fantastic! I felt like I had walked into a world where every quality that made me a difficult child was actually valued. I felt like it was where I belonged. From then on, working on “the Street” was the only dream I ever had—I never wanted to be a ballerina, an astronaut, or a teacher. I became the eight-year-old who wanted to work in finance—the quirky, precocious, “interesting” child. My teachers found me amusing. My mother figured I’d grow out of it. But there was no way that was going to happen. I didn’t know where I wanted to go to college, or even what kind of Trapper Keeper I wanted for fourth grade, but I knew what I wanted to do with my life. And once I set my mind on something, there was nothing anyone could do to change it.

I dedicated the next twelve years to getting a job on the Street. Originally, it was because I thought it seemed like a really fun job, but in college, it became about something else, too. As I grew up I realized that I was privileged. My father made a good living as a banker, and money was never something we worried about. When I arrived at UVA, I realized how many students had taken out loans to pay for their education. I hadn’t. Some kids couldn’t get home for Thanksgiving or Easter because flights were too expensive. I didn’t even check the fares before I made my reservations. Some kids had to work for spending money. I had my parents’ credit card. My father’s career afforded me luxuries I didn’t even know I had until I left the cocoon of suburban Connecticut and entered the real world. (And college wasn’t even the “real world,” really.) It was eye-opening and scary. I didn’t want to live my adult life without the luxuries I grew up with. I didn’t want to worry about paying bills once I graduated, or end up a grown woman completely dependent on a man. I wanted to give my kids the same blissful upbringing I had no matter what my marital fate. I wanted it more than anything. The Street could make that happen. Besides, no one went to work in the Business

because they really liked stocks or bonds, right? They liked financial security. And so did I. So, come senior year of college, I dropped my résumé off in the campus business center and researched various companies to determine where I wanted to work.

As soon as I started educating myself on the differences among the top ten brokerage firms, I realized that Cromwell Pierce was where I wanted to be. My father worked at Sterling Price, Cromwell's fiercest competitor. Sterling is a more uptight, old-school firm. Cromwell had a reputation for being younger, hipper, and a more fun place to work. The headquarters were located downtown, away from the tourist mecca that was Midtown Manhattan (where some of the banks had migrated over the years), and was close to the waterfront. I decided I wanted to apply to the sales and trading program and not the investment banking division. One thing I didn't like about my father's profession was that he worked obscenely long hours most of the time, and he told me that starting out I would be expected to work sixteen-hour days and weekends. Not something I had any interest in doing. Salespeople and traders worked much more humane hours, and weekends were rarely required. It was an easy enough decision to make. My mother sent me a black skirt suit that made me look like Working Girl Barbie, but was a necessary evil if I wanted to impress the people conducting the interview. More than one hundred students were interviewing for just three spots, and while we all sat in the campus business center waiting for our names to be called, the tension was palpable. I had done my due diligence: read the *Wall Street Journal* every day for two weeks, watched CNBC during the day to bone up on industry lingo and jargon, some of which I already knew from my dad, and learned as much about Cromwell as I could. I felt prepared; at least, I thought I was.

When my name was called and I was escorted to a small windowless room, my knees were weak with fear and anticipation. At a large mahogany desk sat two middle-aged men, waiting for me. I took my seat facing them and exhaled one last deep breath before flashing a smile and folding my hands demurely in my lap.

The man on the right, a broad-shouldered blond guy named Ted something or other, wearing a pink tie with yellow starfish on it, spoke first.

“So, Alex, it says here that you’re a finance major. Do you think that makes you adequately prepared for a job on the Street?”

“Well, no, the short answer is, I don’t. I think a solid understanding of the fundamentals will help, but from what I’ve been told, there isn’t a course in the world that can prepare you for a career on Wall Street. You have no idea what it’s really about until you actually do it.”

They both nodded slightly. Ted’s sidekick, a slightly older man who was graying at the temples and had leathery skin that suggested a lot of time spent outdoors, was next to ask a question.

“What’s the square root of two?”

The square root of two? Does two even have a square root? The square root of a number is the number that you squared to get the first number. So the square root of sixteen was four and the square root of four was two. What the hell was the square root of two? It couldn’t be one, because one times one is still one. So it had to be some number greater than one but less than two. Fractions. Shit. Leatherface smirked. Then it hit me.

“The square root of two is the number that you multiply times itself to get two. I don’t know what the exact number is but the square root times itself will equal two.”

Leatherface leaned back in his chair and smiled approvingly, while Ted straightened his starfish tie.

“Interesting answer. You have a unique way of thinking, Ms. Garrett. We like that in the Business. Thinking outside the box is an important ability, and it can’t be taught. You either have it or you don’t.”

“Thank you.” I breathed a sigh of relief, crossed my legs, and noticed a slight tear in my nylons by my left anklebone. Swell.

Starfish Ted looked at me intently. “Do you squeeze the toothpaste tube from the bottom or the top?”

I shifted uncomfortably in my chair. *What the hell did that have to do with anything?*

“Do I what?” I asked him, confused.

“Do you squeeze the toothpaste tube from the top or the bottom?”

Okay, seriously what kind of screwed-up interview was this? I figured the best way to answer the question was honestly, because trying to figure out what these guys were up to seemed futile. “I umm, I don’t. I use one of those toothpaste pumps.”

Leatherface laughed. “You’re the first person that didn’t try to figure out what we wanted you to say.”

“Is there a correct answer?”

“Yes,” Starfish answered. “It’s moot now though, Pump Girl.”

Pump Girl? I didn’t think I liked being called that.

The rest of the interview was easy. We discussed my résumé and my family background. I think having an investment banker for a father scored me a few points. When I left the business center, I felt pretty good about my meeting with Leatherface and Starfish Ted. Two weeks later, I received a letter in the mail, offering me a position in the 2006 analyst program. I was assigned to the government bond desk in the fixed-income division, starting in July. My lifelong dream had been realized. *Watch out Wall Street*, I thought. *Here I come.*

Since my new job started in July, and there was no way in hell I was going to get up at 5:00 a.m. every morning to catch the train into the city from Connecticut, I quickly set about the brutal task of finding an apartment in the city. Thankfully, my best friend, Liv, was looking to move right away also, so the two of us ran around Manhattan for two weeks after graduation, looking for a non-rat-infested building we could afford. We finally found a place suitable for two people and moved in June 15. We divided our tiny one-bedroom Murray Hill apartment into two bedrooms by erecting a fake wall in the living room. I had the real bedroom, and Liv had the fake one, no larger than a prison cell, but with better flooring. The living room could barely accommodate one sofa, a tiny coffee table, and four people comfortably. Our combined

income was more than \$100,000—a lot by normal standards—and yet neither of us could afford her own place. Of all the things that are great about New York, rent isn't one of them. Liv had a job at another investment bank, but in Human Resources, and so we both needed a Manhattan address to spare us the horror of commuting.

We lugged all our belongings, which wasn't much, into the service elevator and up to the twelfth floor with the help of my friend Annie. Annie and I had become friends the first week of freshman year at UVA. We lived on the same floor in the same dorm. One night, when our resident adviser was locked in her room with her boyfriend, we stole the sofa from the lounge and moved it into Annie's room at the end of the hall. When she was caught a week later, she was forced to sort mail at the university post office for a month as punishment. But she never told the RA that the great couch caper of 2002 was orchestrated by yours truly. For that, I will love her forever.

Annie had decided to prolong school as long as possible by attending NYU to get a master's in psychology. After discovering how early Liv and I had to get up now that we were part of the working world, she was pretty sure she didn't want to enter it.

"How on earth are you going to get up at 5:30 and not be a zombie by 3:00?" Annie asked. "That's just unholy." She looked at me the same way I look at people over forty who aren't married: with unabashed pity. She sat on the living room floor and pushed her curly blond hair behind her ears. Annie had done gymnastics as a kid and possessed a flexible, toned physique I wouldn't have even if I lived on carrot sticks. I know this for a fact. I tried for most of freshman year.

"I'm sure I'll get used to it," I said as I jammed sweaters in my closet.

"I'd rather die," she added.

"Are you excited?" Liv asked as she broke down boxes with a razor and laid them flat against the wall next to a bookshelf. She picked dust bunnies off her black spandex shorts with a perfectly manicured nail and ran her sleeve across her forehead. "I don't start until next week, and I'm kind of dreading it."

“I’m excited. I guess a little nervous, too. It’s like the first day of school all over again. New people, new places. I hope I don’t screw up anything too badly.”

“You’ll be fine,” Annie assured me as she stood to leave for her own apartment on the Upper West Side. And by “her own apartment” I mean the one her parents kept in the city for the two times a year they came to Manhattan to see a show. She gave me a quick hug and waved goodbye to Liv as she headed for the elevators. “Call me tomorrow and let me know how it goes,” she yelled over her shoulder.

I helped Liv lug boxes to the refuse room down the hall, and we spent the next few hours unpacking, cleaning, hanging, ironing, scrubbing, organizing, and discussing how excited we both were to have our very own apartment in Manhattan. I went to bed at 9:30, still leaving a lot of boxes untouched, and prayed that my first week of work would be merciful. *I’m sure it won’t be too bad*, I assured myself. *It’s just a job. How bad could it possibly be?*