

# AMBEREYE

*by*

Gill McKnight



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## CHAPTER ONE

Jolie Garoul slammed her car door and headed toward the elevators, her heels clicking sharply on the concrete.

She stepped in, punched button three, and then glowered at her image in the smoked mirrors. A tall, gaunt figure glowered disinterestedly back. Her mouth was already a tight, angry line, her eyes fierce and unhappy, and the day had barely begun. But Jolie Garoul had no time for appearances. There was work to be done. Deadlines with not enough hours in the day to meet them, endless meetings with total idiots, and lazy-ass, incompetent employees who wanted coffee breaks and regular hours and generally got in the way of an efficient office.

*If that report is not waiting for me as promised, I'm gonna fly down to Florida myself and rip Malcolm's lying tongue out. I wonder if the patch for Release 12.7 is ready? When can we run that? I need to see Williams. We can't have a delay like last time. People were idle, sitting around on their fat backsides getting paid for squat.*

The elevator doors slid open, and she moved onto the office floor of Ambereye, Inc., en route to her little corner of the Garoul business empire. She could hear laughter from the small staff kitchen and smell a rich coffee roast. The clock read 7:33 a.m., but already employees were coming into the office in dribs and drabs, heading for the kitchen and their morning caffeine fix. *Twenty-seven minutes and you're all mine. Better hope that coffee wakes you the hell up.*

Then she noticed the balloons pinned to the cubicle closest to her office. It had always been purposely left empty. A recognized buffer zone, a deliberate and necessary no man's land between her office and the rest of the workforce. No one wanted to sit there, and Jolie

preferred it that way. It meant she didn't have to look at any of them as she worked through the latest load of incompetence dumped on her desk. Much more inspiring to sit and stare gloomily at the abandoned hardware and dust bunnies cluttering up the empty cubicle than look at her employees. Except this morning the cubicle was cleared out and cleaned. A top-spec computer was sitting on the desk along with a brand-new state-of-the-art ergonomic chair. Nicer than her own. Much nicer.

She glared at the new hardware and the executive chair. What did it all mean? With a scowl she mashed the padded headrest in her hand and wheeled the luxury seat into her own office, casting a last disdainful look at the balloons. *See they're keeping their brains on strings these days.*

Seconds later, a well-aimed kick sent an older, tattier chair spinning out of her door on whizzing castors. It crashed haphazardly into the cubicle and toppled over the brand-new wastepaper bin.



Hope Glassy slammed her car door and trotted happily toward the elevators. Once there, Hope punched button three and anxiously assessed her image in the elevator's smoked mirrors. *It looks damned good.* She reassured herself again. *Nearly impossible to tell.*

The doors pinged open, and she headed directly to the kitchen where she knew she'd find her friends. Every morning Candace and Michael huddled over their coffee before the day truly began. Already she could hear the murmur of voices she recognized. It sounded as if Sally, Deepak, Nadeem, and a few others had joined them. *God, it's good to be back.*

Michael's cheery voice rang out as soon as she appeared in the doorway. "There's our girl."

"Hey, prodigal. I missed you." Candace rushed to wrap her in a massive hug, even though she'd visited Hope at home only last week. "You came back for all your sins."

Candace's big, hearty laugh was joined by a chorus of welcomes as Hope was hugged by the dozen or so friends who'd gathered to meet her.

"Guys, look. I brought Krispy Kremes. Who loves ya?" Hope

placed the box on the counter. It was ripped open before she could blink.

“They still don’t feed you around here, or what?” she said. “Even the zoo provides snacks for its inmates.”

“You’ve got to be kidding. You get a snack here, and ole Jollyface counts how many times you chew before swallowing.”

“What zoo? Are they recruiting?”

“Yeah, the monkey house, you’re as good as in.”

“That’s where we got him from.”

As in most offices with a small crew, they were a tight team, sharing each other’s highs and lows. Their humor and camaraderie helped to get them through a tough workload and a tougher schedule. Despite all the moaning, everyone loved their job and wouldn’t wish to work elsewhere. Ambereye Inc., for all its size, had a cutting-edge reputation in games software development, and it carried a certain amount of prestige to be a part of its universal success.

“Save me a chocolate sprinkle,” Candace commanded the unruly scrabble before turning her full attention to Hope. “You are looking a million dollars, babe. You can’t believe how happy we are to have you back.”

Hope had a fair idea. Candace had replaced her as personal assistant to Andre Garoul, the CEO, after Hope had gone on sick leave. She had returned earlier than expected because Ambereye had won another important contract and was gearing up for busy times ahead. Andre had been dropping hints for weeks now about how much they needed her. So now she was back and excited to see her colleagues, but she was still unsure of where her new position would be. Andre hadn’t been very clear on that point.

“I’m raring to go. So tell me the latest news. Any idea where they’re going to put me?”

“Mmm, maybe it’s better I leave the best bit to Andre,” Candace said. She reached for her reserved doughnut. “How’s Tadpole?”

It was a pretty lame segue, and didn’t fool Hope for one minute. Combined with the covert, sympathetic glances she was getting from her colleagues, her suspicions began to rise.

“Tadpole is doing just fine. What’s going on here?” She brought the discussion about her pet dog to an abrupt end and got straight to the point.

“Come on. Spit it out.” Her eyes narrowed with suspicion. She was not going to be distracted.

“Well...” It seemed Candace had been subliminally delegated to break the news to her. After all, she was Hope’s buddy as well as her replacement. “Okay. So, Andre made me his assistant in your absence. But you know all about that.”

“Yes.” Hope nodded. Andre had visited her at home several times. He was a good friend to her, much more than a boss. But then he was a wonderful guy to work for, period. Apologetic about the reshuffle, he’d explained that a big project had just landed on his desk and he needed Candace on board from the get-go. He’d promised to squeeze Hope into an interesting position that would fit around her new part-time hours. He was bending over backwards to get her into the office as soon as possible.

“It makes sense since I’m only coming back part time. So, what’s the problem?” She frowned over the rim of her coffee cup at her friends. They were looking decidedly shifty, and no one wanted to look at her.

“What? What is it? You’re freaking me out here. Guys?”

Candace stepped up to the mark. “Okay. Well, word is, and it *is* only rumor, that you’re the new PA for Jollyface.”

“What?” Hope exploded. “Andre never told me that. I was talking to him just last night, and he never once mentioned it. Are you sure?”

“Yup,” Michael muffled through a mouth of lemon filled glaze. “We even put balloons up in the Bunker—I mean your new cubicle. And Andre got you a new PC, and a real fancy chair as a special treat.”

“As a special bribe, more like.” Hope was aghast. Jolie Garoul, aka Jollyface, was a walking nightmare.

“And it’s bulletproof.” Sally tried a joke, but only managed to underscore the problem. Jolie Garoul had more moods than an orchestra pit.

“I don’t get it. Jolie never has assistants. I assumed she never wanted one,” Hope said.

“It’s this new project. They’ve had to reshuffle the workload. I think everyone’s more or less doubled up with no extensions to deadlines. It’s all hands on deck for your new department.”

“Well, I suppose it’s only for four days a week until this project’s over.” Hope was determined to look on the bright side. “If we’re busy, then I’ll have to go where I’m needed most. Hey ho.” She gave her

brightest, most upbeat smile, resolute that all would be well. Hope had been itching to get back to work for weeks before her doctor would allow it. This was what she had wanted. *Careful what you wish for.*

“Ah, your parents named you well.” Michael dropped a huge meaty hand on her shoulder, almost buckling her at the knees.

“Easy there, big boy,” Candace said. “We only just got her back.”

None too dainty herself, she flung an arm around Hope’s waist and maneuvered her out of the kitchen and toward the balloon-adorned workspace. Hope was glad of the slow pace; her balance could still play tricks on her.

“Come see your new PC. You got the sexiest monitor *and* chair,” Candace said.

“Hope.” Andre Garoul descended on them from his office suite at the far end of the floor, a huge ribboned vase of roses in his arms. “Hi, darling. Great to see you back in the trenches. Just in time for the big push.” He towered over her, dazzling her with a huge, happy grin that lit up his dark good looks.

“More like the big pushover.” She accepted the bouquet pressed into her arms. “Is it true I’m working for Jolie now?” She peeped over the topmost blossoms. “These are absolutely beautiful, by the way.”

“Mmm, well. Yes. I really need you to, Hope.” His charming smile stretched a little thin, and a flash of desperation lit his eyes.

“Why didn’t you say something at dinner last night?” They walked on together, the rest of the welcome party slowly peeling away to their desks as the workday began.

“I was scared you’d be a no-show.”

“You know I’d never let you down, Andy.” She used his homey name. “But I can’t believe you welched out of telling me. You’re such a yellow belly.”

“I’m such a yellow six-pack,” he corrected her. Several paces from her new booth, his pager began to hum on his belt.

“Hang on.” He unclipped it and squinted at the screen. “Oh, hon. I’ve got to go. My call from Phoenix came through early. Look, I’ll drop by later, okay?”

He was already backpedaling, eyes huge with apology. Hope shook her head and smiled ruefully at him. He’d been saved from her scolding by his heavy workload and uncanny luck.

“Later,” she said.

Tipping the vase and its fragrant contents at him she mouthed, “Thank you” and turned to her new desk.

“Now, that is one nice computer,” Hope mumbled to herself, placing her flowers on her desk. She realigned the chair and picked up the toppled wastepaper bin. She slid her bag under her desk and sat down. She wriggled in the seat, not as impressed with the so-called fancy chair as she was with her hardware. Next she checked the drawers, pleased to see Candace had stacked them with pens, paper, and a stapler. All the odds and ends that saved a tedious trip to the stationery cupboard. She wiggled in her seat again. *Wow, this is not my idea of luxurious. In fact, it has a serious butt groove thing going on.*

Hope clicked open her compact and checked her makeup and general appearance in the mirror. *Okay, looking good.* Satisfied, she gathered a pencil and spiral notebook, and with a calming breath, rose and marched over to her new boss’s office. She rapped gently on the open door before entering.

Jolie Garoul sat behind her desk, slashing open mail with the vicious enthusiasm of a cutthroat; her silver letter opener glinted evilly. Hope noted the handle was styled with an elaborate wolf’s head. It looked expensive and antique.

“Good morning, Ms. Garoul.”

Eyes as black as midnight, and as soulless as a shark, looked back at her. With a quick flick they took her in from head to toe, assessed, judged, and rudely dismissed her, all in one uncomfortable instant. Hope flushed and struggled to hide her discomfort and annoyance.

Clearing her throat, Hope said, “Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Huh?”

“Is there anything I can help you with?”

“Yeah. Who the hell are you?” The question was cold and snipped, and came at her with all the personality of a bullet.

## CHAPTER TWO

Hope stood frozen for a moment. *Never mind who I am, why Ham I even here talking to this Class-A bitch?*

“I’m Hope Glassy. Your new PA?” *I’ve been with the company over seven years. Don’t pretend you don’t know me.*

“What?”

“Your new personal assistant—”

“I know what a PA is,” Jolie snapped.

“Do you know what manners are?” Hope came back at her coldly. “If so, I suggest you use them.”

She swung majestically on her heel to leave the office and head straight to Andre’s so she could throttle him with her bare hands. Momentarily, she lost her depth perception and staggered, grabbing at the door frame. Steadied, she rose to her full five foot three inches and as confidently as possible, considering she’d almost landed on her face, stalked to her desk. She slid into the uncomfortable seat and rested her head in her hands until her heart rate settled.

*Shit.* Her mind in a whirl, she tugged at her bangs. *Shit, shit, shit. This is impossible. I can’t do this. I can’t blow my top every time she acts like an ass.* She’d be in cardiac arrest before lunch.



*She’s drunk.* Jolie sprang to her feet. *A drunk has just wandered into my office. Wonderful.* She glared through the door to the cubicle that once upon a time had been empty, and therefore as restful as a field of opium poppies. Now it was full. Full of a... a bad-tempered PA, with a drinking problem.

*It's not even eight thirty, for God's sake, and she's loaded.* Jolie stomped to her door. Andre would have to resolve this. He was the one who'd brought the lush a bunch of flowers, so he could be the one to fire her.

Before her, her supposed PA was also on her feet and heading in the direction of Andre's office.

*Oh no, you don't, Lushy. I'm gonna tell Andre all about you first.* Lengthening her stride, she swerved to the right-hand aisle so she did not have to directly follow on the heels of her supposed assistant all the way to her brother's office.



The right-hand side was Hope's good side. She could see Jolie Garoul striding purposefully down the far aisle with obviously the same destination in mind.

*Oh no, you don't, you ill-mannered harpy. I'm going to be the first to rip Andre a new A-hole! You can talk to it after I'm done.* And immediately she sped up to a neat little trot, her head start putting her in pole position.

As Jolie and Hope headed into the final straight, heads were popping up from all over the office watching the stilted walking race toward the CEO's door. It was obvious there had been an altercation.

Nadeem sprang to his feet as Jolie pounded past his cubicle. Hastily he grabbed at a paper. Flapping it in the air like a one-winged seagull, he called out, "Ms. Garoul, I have a question about the design schema."

Jolie faltered, staggered almost. Her body screamed at her to continue with its ever-increasing momentum—she sensed she was winning—while her mind was immediately engaged with a possible work problem.

Then she realized Nadeem was, in fact, waving a Krispy Kreme napkin at her and her opponent was at that precise moment barreling up to Andre's door. Nadeem had tricked her into losing the race! She felt the general sigh of relief around the office that she'd been waylaid. *They're all on Lushy's side, ungrateful pack rats.* She glowered at Nadeem, the little backstabber.

"I thought I told you to never, ever, talk to me before the nine a.m.

meeting. Never. Not even to tell me the building's on fire." She glared at him coldly. "What are you to do if the building's on fire?"

Nadeem quaked before her. "Fax you," he mumbled.

"What?"

"Fax your office to tell you there's a fire."

"And why?"

"Because I am not allowed to talk to you before the nine a.m. meeting, Ms. Garoul."

"And why?"

"Because I annoy you."

"Good. So, Chicken Little, I'll look forward to your report on the schemata falling, where you will no doubt highlight in minute detail what your mistimed alarm relates to. *And I expect to see documentation.*"

Over his shoulder she could see a lot of arm action through the glass panels of Andre's office. The drunk had her back to the door and was animatedly waving her hands in the air as drunks tend to. *I knew it. Rabid little gin sipper.*

Andre, facing her way, had his hands up in a pleading, placatory fashion. *Maybe she's got a knife. That'll teach him.*

Deciding there was no point loitering, she returned to her office, slamming the door behind her so hard the glass panels rattled. She was well aware that the minute she turned her back, Nadeem would begin receiving thumbs-ups and back slaps. *Let him be the hero of the hour,* she huffed. *Until nine a.m.*



"What do you mean she must have forgotten?" Hope said. "I swear, Andre, I don't know which one of you I'm going to throttle first. Did you even tell her?"

"Of course I—"

"The truth." Hope knew him too well.

"Well, it may have been a tail-ender...at a meeting, and she may have left a little early." He shrugged as nonchalantly as he dared.

"What?"

"Hey, it's in the minutes. She had plenty of time to read those and get back to me. Plenty of time. Until this morning."

Hope slumped on the black leather couch opposite his huge desk. “Andre, are you mad? She hates me.”

“Don’t be silly, she doesn’t even know you.”

“Somehow that doesn’t help.”

“I mean, she won’t hate you once she gets to know you and sees how super efficient you are. Then she’ll love you.”

Hope snorted at this.

“Okay, okay. Look, Hope, this is a seriously massive project. I need Jolie to pull it together on time. And whether she believes it or not, she needs help. She needs a right-hand guy she can trust and lean on. If she continues at this rate, she’ll go pop one of these days. And she’s my annoying twin sister, and I don’t want that to happen to her. Look, I’ll get her to settle down.” He was practically on his knees. “Please just give it a chance. I’m sorry she was so underprepared and got in a snit. You have to admit it’s not like Jolie. The underprepared bit, I mean.”

Hope frowned grumpily at him, but the firm set of her jaw was already softening from when she’d first stormed into his office. He knew he had won, but he also knew he had to charm her into believing it was a gracious concession on her part. He’d known Hope Glassy since before he’d opened the doors of Ambereye. They had worked together for another software company, and were the best of friends. She had danced at his wedding with none other than his own groom.

In fact, years earlier she had introduced him to the man who was to become his life partner. Godfrey Meyers was a friend of Hope’s from the Sandpit’s pool team. The Sandpit was an infamous gay bar in Portland, and Godfrey and Hope were a mean mixed doubles team back in the bad old days. Andre had been dragged down there one night to yell support in a cup match. He had met Godfrey’s electric blue gaze over the pool table, and that was that.

Now he looked at Hope, saw her flushed cheeks, her upset that her first day back was going so wrong, and he felt incredibly guilty. He had in no way underestimated her ability, but maybe he had been too hasty to set this amount of stress on her shoulders. Why the hell couldn’t Jolie just react like someone sane? What was the matter with her? Didn’t she know she was looking a gift horse in the mouth? She was lucky to have Hope on her team, even part-time. Lucky.

He looked at Hope’s left eye. Because he knew her so well, he could tell, could see the difference in the set of the eyelid, the strange

luster of her iris. He knew *he* was lucky to be sitting here looking at her at all. His guts constricted. Hope glanced up and caught him looking at her eye. Her cheeks reddened but she held his stare.

“We’re lucky to have you, Hope. It’s going to be okay. I need you and Jolie needs you. She just doesn’t realize it yet.”



“I don’t need her. I don’t need anybody,” Jolie bellowed at him. “Are you suggesting I can’t cope? That I can’t do my job? Who the hell is she, anyway?”

“For God’s sake, woman, calm down.” Andre struggled not to yell back. “No one’s suggesting anything of the sort. You need a PA. *I* need a PA. We are embarking on a major project and there can be no slipups. You need someone watching your back, picking up the slack—”

“What slack? Are you suggesting I’m slac—”

“The slack in the noose around your neck, but you’re too thick-skulled to notice it.” He did snap this time. “You were at the meeting when Hope transferred over. It’s in the minutes. Suck it up.”

She glowered at him, but he could see the cogs grinding away behind her eyes. He knew she wanted this project to come together even more than he did. He knew having a PA was slowly making sense to her, but would she overcome her personal issues? Jolie didn’t want anyone near her. She was like a junkyard dog with a bone, but she had to learn to share...and to trust. Her office was her bolt hole, her place of safety in a world that sometimes confused and threatened her. If he hadn’t made her get out into that world and use her considerable brainpower for the good of their software company, Andre swore Jolie would have happily scabbled an even bigger hole to sit in and whiled away her life. She had a den mentality all right, but had nothing but work to fill it.

Stress ruled every waking minute of her life, and from the dark rings around her eyes it played a major part in her sleep patterns, too. She didn’t give a damn about anything but Ambereye’s success.

Andre hadn’t lied to Hope; he *was* worried about Jolie’s health. It had been months since he’d last seen her smile. The workforce disliked her with a passion that actually broke his heart, but she got results and they had a grudging respect for that, if nothing else. Deep down he

was certain Hope Glassy could turn things around for his stressed-out, burned-down sister. He was gambling on it.

With a sniff Jolie stood and made for the door. There was no time left to argue, the deal was already done. She accepted she'd missed her opportunity for protest. He'd slipped one past her at a hyperbusy moment. Andre's sneaky methods annoyed her, but he was usually astute, and she trusted his opinion. Maybe he knew something she didn't about the upcoming project, or this PA person?

"So, who is she again?" Her hand rested on the door handle and she glanced back at him. Andre looked genuinely surprised.

"Hope. Hope Glassy." He looked confused when the name didn't register with her. "Jesus, Jolie, she was my assistant like, forever."

Annoyance bled into his voice and she felt color stain her cheeks. It irritated her to be judged because she didn't immediately recognize the name. In fact, she still didn't. Jolie paid little attention to things like that. Facts and figures were her companions. She reported to Andre alone and had little time for anyone or anything else. People disinterested her.

To keep him happy, and his acid tongue in his mouth, she feigned recognition. The PA did look *vaguely* familiar. Nodding slightly, she grunted something that sounded like a confirmation and left, shutting the door behind her with a sharp click.