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Amber Scott is Starting Over

Written by Ruth Saberton

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AMBER SCOTT IS STARTING OVER

Ruth Saberton



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Chapter One

Just breathe! Relax! Don't stress, Amber, it's only a job interview. It's not as though you're about to be tortured! All you have to do is look smart, sound intelligent and manage to make it into the boardroom without laddering your tights. Just how hard can it be?

You can do this! You can!

Unfortunately the reflection that peers nervously back at me, floating in the bright glass of the reception window, doesn't look particularly convinced by this pep talk, and I don't blame her. It feels like a washing machine on spin cycle has taken up residence in my stomach, and my mouth has that horrible pre-vomit tinny tang. Looking smart and sounding intelligent is a tall order anyway on an ordinary, just-going-to-work morning, so how I ever thought I'd be able to pull it off for the biggest moment of my professional life is a total mystery.

Oh Lord. Maybe I should just go home now? Who am I trying to kid that I stand a chance of getting this job? What on earth was I thinking? I'm rubbish at job interviews. Just thinking about sitting across the table from an interrogation squad and trying to sound intelligent turns me into such a quivering jelly that you could serve me up with ice cream. Look at my hands! I'm shaking!

Hmm. Better not apply that third coat of killer red lippy. I don't want to look like an extra from *Twilight*, do I? Although I'm already so pale with nerves that I could be mistaken for the undead. Edward Cullen, eat your heart out.

For as long as I can remember, I've dreaded job interviews. I

hate having to squeeze myself into my Karen Millen straitjacket. Why do I always think I can diet into it? Surely by the grand old age of twenty-nine I should have resigned myself to the fact that my body is stubbornly stuck at a generous size twelve? Even if I never eat again, I'll never be an eight. I also loathe bullying my curly hair into what's meant to be a sleek chignon but instead bears more resemblance to a scruffy nest where a pair of starlings has taken up residence. Although the Vicky Pollard facelift effect is strangely flattering, it feels like every hair's being plucked from my scalp, and I can't help worrying that my watering eyes are turning me into a dead ringer for Alice Cooper. So not a good look for impressing the editor of one of the UK's most cutting-edge fashion magazines.

Maybe I can fix all this before it's too late?

I reach into my bag and delve around for my mirror, which is easier said than done since I own the world's first Tardis bag. I swear that when I left home this morning all I'd put in there were my mirror, my purse, my BlackBerry and my keys, but it now appears that by some strange magic, leaky biros and fluffy Tampax have moved in too. My fingers grapple with gooey sweets and screwed-up till receipts for what feels like aeons until the bag has enough and leaps from my lap to vomit its contents all over the floor.

'Bollocks!' I say, and then want to rip my tongue out, because this is hardly language suitable for Britain's smartest glossy. 'I mean, oops!'

I glance towards the enormous chrome and glass desk just in case the receptionist is looking in my direction. She's incredibly slim, with make-up that's such a work of art that the Louvre is probably bidding for it. She's been looking down her perfect nose at me all morning too, which I suppose isn't surprising really, because the hallowed offices of *Senora* magazine are staffed by people who all look like they've been genetically modified in order to meet some unwritten company policy. While I've been waiting nervously outside the editor's

office, a mind-boggling identikit army of tall, thin women clad in designer labels has tripped past, balancing like tightrope-walkers on their Jimmy Choos and Manolo Blahniks. Their lips are slick with gloss, their nails expensively French-manicured and they all have names like Araminta and butterscotch-smooth tans from skiing. Their thick manes of expensively streaked blonde hair make my crazy frizz look like a comedy wig.

Feeling as though I've been beamed down from another planet, I sit on my hands just in case someone spots my tatty nails and passes out in sheer disgust. In my favour I am blonde, but that's where the similarity ends. Unlike these ironing-board women, I'm short and curvy, with boobs and hips, and even though I'm nearly thirty, I'm as yet a stranger to Botox. If these stunning girls are supermodel wannabes, then I guess I'm more like a scruffy reject from the Playboy Mansion. How did I ever imagine I'd fit in here? Maybe I should just sneak out now, before it's too late. After I've scooped up all the crap from my bag, obviously.

The receptionist is on the telephone now, her impossibly narrow back to me, so I seize my chance and fall on to my knees, cramming the detritus back into my bag and hoping the reclaimed oak floorboards don't ladder my stockings, because you can bet your life the one thing I *won't* have in my bag is an emergency pair of tights. When I applied for this job at *Senora* I should have paid more attention to the advice they churn out each month. Who knows, I could even get a flat stomach and better orgasms if the latest edition is to be believed.

OK, who am I trying to kid? The flat stomach's *never* going to happen while I have this serious carrot-cake addiction, and even one measly orgasm would be an improvement. Complaining about the quality seems the height of picky. Ed's always so busy with work that the nearest I get to sex these days is walking past Ann Summers on the way to the tube, which is very depressing. Actually, what's more depressing is the fact that I can't even be bothered to wander in and browse.

I blame the Marks and Spencer food hall opposite. How can a girl possibly concentrate on vibrators and suspender belts when crème brûlées and bagels are calling out to her? It's a sad sign of the times that I get more pleasure from ripping the lid off a sticky toffee pudding than I do from ripping off my fiancé's clothes. Still, I suppose that's only to be expected after almost ten years together. All these glossy women's magazines might try and convince us that the rest of the world is at it non-stop, but I bet in reality most people just want to crash out after a hard day. Who seriously wants to grind, and wiggle and worry about sucking in their stomach when they could be curled up on the sofa watching Phil and Kirstie? All that passion malarkey might be good for selling Mills & Boon novels, but in real life I'm with Boy George and sticking to a nice cup of tea instead.

And maybe a biscuit or too . . .

Bag safely stuffed full again and compact retrieved, I flip open the mirror and sure enough, as suspected, I've mutated into a giant panda. Licking my finger, I attempt a repair job but end up smearing mascara all over my giant eye bags and on to my cheeks. And because this is Dior going-absolutely-nowhere-unless-removed-with-a-blowtorch mascara, there is no way on earth I can scrub it off.

Oh God, Oh God. I can't possibly go in like this. I look like a Victorian consumptive. This is *Senora* magazine, the font of all fashion knowledge. What on earth was I thinking? Maybe it's time to do a runner. If I get right down on my hands and knees, the receptionist will never know . . .

'Amber Scott?' the receptionist calls, just as I'm contemplating a commando roll out of the room. She peers at me like somebody's shoved a rotting haddock under her nose and only just manages not to recoil at the sight of my Kiss-style make-up. 'They're ready for you in the boardroom.'

For a moment there's a roaring in my ears and I feel horribly light-headed. I couldn't be more terrified if Alan Sugar was in there too, waiting to verbally maul me. Can I make a run for

it? My funky platform boots will surely give me a speed advantage over the receptionist's trendy spike heels.

'Miss Scott?' barks the receptionist. 'Now, if you please?'

Oh crap, she's out from behind her desk and blocking the exit. There's no way I can escape now, unless I rugby-tackle her to the ground. For a split second I seriously consider this, but although she's thin, her biceps are pure Madonna, and there's a steely look in her eye that suggests she's not to be messed with.

Shit, bugger and damn. It looks like I'm going to have to brave the boardroom.

Shoving the mirror back into my bag with fingers more frozen than Captain Birdseye's, I clamber to my feet. Oh God. Oh God. Oh God. Why did I ever think it was a good idea to put myself through this?

Because, Amber, says a small voice deep down inside, you *really, really* want this job, and actually you could be really good at it. Give it a shot. After all, what have you got to lose?

Er, my dignity? Pride? And self-respect? But hey-ho, goodbye to those. It looks as though I really am going to do this interview. There is simply no way out, except through the window, and since we're on the twelfth floor, I don't fancy my chances if I exit that way. I'm not suicidal.

Yet.

Swinging my bag on to my shoulder, I clomp across the wooden floor and through the door that leads to my certain doom. Inside is a horseshoe arrangement of fashionistas, all so waxed and plucked and Botoxed and fake-tanned that they're probably entirely new creations. Fixing a smile to my face, I check for my mental parachute and jump.

'Amber, please take a seat.'

A woman seated smack in the centre of the horseshoe barks this order at me. Wow, she's a dead ringer for Skeletor, if he'd ever worn a blonde wig and drag. One tiny leg is crossed over a bony knee, which glows greeny-white through gossamer-sheer stockings, and her collarbones look so sharp, they could

possibly be classed as lethal weapons. She's holding my portfolio in her veiny, hands and while I hover, wondering which empty chair I'm allowed to perch on, she flicks through my work in a bored fashion. Just looking at her sunken cheeks and razor-blade shoulders fills me with regret for the huge wodge of carrot cake I stuffed my face with earlier. I'm never going to fit in here, not when I'm all squidgy. This job is never going to be mine – it has size zero written all over it. I never stood a chance.

Instantly I feel so much better. If I never stood a chance then there's nothing to lose, is there?

'Sit,' orders the woman, still flicking through my portfolio, and I obey. Of course I do, because she's none other than Evangeline St Anthony, the iconic sixties model and famous editor of *Senora* magazine. Forget the notoriously difficult Miranda Priestley of *The Devil Wears Prada* fame. In comparison to Evangeline, she's a pussy! The woman in front of me right now is infamous for deciding on a whim the length of skirts fashionable across the globe or the definitive colour of a season's wardrobe. She can make or break a designer with one word, and her insightful comment, *black is the new black*, was quoted and debated as though uttered by a Nobel prizewinner.

I am not worthy.

'Thank you for seeing me,' I squeak, as I attempt to perch on the teeny-weeny seat. I just about manage to squeeze one buttock on it and arrange my features in what is hopefully an intelligent expression. I feel horribly like a specimen in a lab. Any second now they'll start prodding me.

'Welcome to *Senora* magazine, Amber. I'm sure you know who I am.' Evangeline pauses so that I can nod reverentially. 'This is my team, the team that, if you are successful, you'll join as artistic director.'

She continues to introduce the rest of the horseshoe one by one, while I nod and smile until I feel dizzy and their names drip from my mind like butter from hot toast. Everyone is so immaculate, from the small Chinese woman with skin like

honey to the beautiful gay man sizing me up from beneath his floppy fringe.

What *was* I thinking? I could *never* fit in here! Beneath my pink suit I start to sweat. Why did I pick pink? I must have been mad! Everyone here is dressed in black; they could moonlight as funeral directors and nobody would bat an eyelid. And *why* did I think it was a good idea to wear my favourite Camden knee boots, biker-style and with platform soles higher than Ben Nevis? They seemed like a really funky statement when I pulled them on earlier, but I probably look more like Minnie Mouse in a suit.

'This is an extremely impressive portfolio,' Evangeline tells me. She may be smiling but it's hard to tell because there's so much Botox swimming round her face. 'I especially like the work you've done at *Blush!* magazine. Your seniors there have credited you entirely with their fresh new look.'

'Thanks,' I say, and it's really weird, because when I think about my work my heart rate starts to slow, and rather than sounding like I've been gulping helium, my voice is actually calm and measured. 'The readership increased by forty-eight per cent after the repackaging and rebranding I devised.'

And suddenly I'm up and running. Questions are fired at me quicker than tennis balls on Centre Court, but rather than turning into a gibbering wreck, I become the Rafael Nadal of the interview world. I lob figures about and volley stunning examples of my expertise. I even serve an ace when I point out that I've been commissioned to redesign *Blush!*'s sister magazine, *Femme*, the direct rival to *Senora*.

But enough of the tennis analogy already!

I *love* my job. I absolutely *love* it. Does this make me a sad no-life muppet? I actually look forward to getting up in the morning, listening to Radio 4 while I eat my muesli (*Radio 4*? Eek! How did that happen? Why don't I know any of the music played on Radio 1 any more?) and then walking to the tube. I love buying a skinny latte and blueberry muffin and reading the *Metro* while the Piccadilly Line burrows under the

traffic jams and crowded streets. I even enjoy shoehorning myself into the creaking lift at Covent Garden and stumbling out blinking into the daylight, because there's something about London that fills me with excitement. All that life and energy teeming from every building, the hordes of office workers, the rumbling buses, the buskers and the rush of warm tube-driven air! Everything about city life gives me a thrill. I am so with Dr Johnson! I adore being part of something so vital and so alive and I feel really lucky to have made it this far. How many other twenty-somethings dream of working for a glossy magazine? Loads. But I actually do. And I never take it for granted, because I know how lucky I am.

In all my wildest dreams I never expected to work for a magazine. My fiancé, Ed, spent most of our university days mocking my Mickey Mouse degree (Art History with English Lit, as opposed to his Law) and told the joke 'What do you say to an arts graduate? Big Mac and fries!' so many times that he wore it out. After graduating, most of my friends gave in to their hideous student debts and before the ink was even dry on their degree certificates signed away their souls to teacher training. I thought about it, but the idea of doing daily battle with bolshie adolescents was about as appealing as pulling off my own head. So instead I moved to London with Ed, who was doing articles with the top law firm Colville and West, and in between working on my own paintings and completing endless job applications I did temp work in offices. This was originally meant to be a stopgap, but because it was easy and left me time for painting, I ended up doing it for five years.

Then, one rainy November morning, I surfaced from Covent Garden tube, clutching my A to Z, and set off for the offices of *Blush!*, a struggling teen magazine where I had a week's work. In my rucksack was a tatty copy of the latest edition, annotated and smothered in yellow Post-its on which I'd scrawled all my ideas and suggestions.

It was so obvious why the magazine wasn't selling. The

typeface was plain, the colours muted, the masthead hardly noticeable and the layout so weary it practically yawned. My teenage niece, Kerrie, had curled her lip like a small hoodied version of Mick Jagger when I'd told her about my latest job, because apparently only really sad people read *Blush!*. Intrigued, I'd done some digging on the internet and discovered that the ABC figures spoke for themselves. Speculation on numerous media websites suggested that the magazine was doomed to fold unless some major changes were made.

I'd sensed an opportunity and gone for it. Once settled at my desk, I'd discovered that the senior designer spent all her time in Harvey Nicks and that her deputy was a Sloane with a brain like Aero. Within minutes I'd booted up the dusty Macs, taught Liz, the lowly junior, how to use Photoshop and mocked up a new front cover that was all hot pinks and acid limes. Complete with a photo of Kerrie as a cover girl and some bold teasers, this new cover didn't so much grab your attention as jump off the screen and tap-dance in front of you. It looked, even if I said so myself, amazing. I knew I was on to something . . .

Anyway, for once my guardian angel was on the case, because at the very moment I was admiring my handiwork, the editor-in-chief, Ali Jones, happened to pass through the office and catch sight of my work.

'Fuck me backwards!' she'd screeched, stopping dead in her tracks so that two acolytes cannoned into her. 'What the fucking fuck is that?' Back then I didn't know that Ali always swore like a navvy. Instead I'd thought I was in big trouble for interfering. My face turned crimson, and muttering apologies I frantically tried to minimise the screen, but because this was bloody Mac OS, I couldn't remember how and my design refused to budge, glowing in all its neon glory into the mid-morning gloom.

'It was her idea!' Liz squeaked in terror, running her hands through her frizzy red curls. 'She thought of it all.'

Ali had taken a deep breath. With her beaky nose and

heavy-lidded eyes, she looked like a bird of prey poised to pounce. 'I'll get rid of it,' I offered hastily. 'I was just wondering what the magazine would look like with a different cover. Sorry, I'll get back to work.'

'Leave it!' barked Ali. She stood with her hands on her hips and breathed heavily through her nose. 'It's bright. It's funky. There's an unknown on the cover.' She looked at me for a moment, and then her mouth curved into a smile. 'It's bloody brilliant, that's what it is. I don't know who the fuck you are, but you're hired.'

And that was that. I was Senior Designer, Liz was my deputy and my predecessor was history. Given carte blanche to make whatever changes I thought best, I immediately hired Kerrie and her friends to do some audience research, and within six months *Blush!* had become the must-read magazine for teenage girls. It had the best freebies, was always first with the newest looks and every month the front cover and fashion pages featured real-life models. No half-starved waifs ever made their way on to the pages of *Blush!*. The press loved the idea, *This Morning* raved about it, teachers and parents approved, and everyone was happy, especially the chief executive of LivMags, who awarded us all fat pay increases and bought himself a villa in the Caribbean.

I'd found my calling. And for the past four years I've loved every minute. The *Blush!* offices are on the first two floors of a converted Georgian town house just off Floral Street and only a pumice stone's throw from The Sanctuary. Normally I'd make excuses not to go anywhere near gyms and health clubs, but there's something so wonderful about the fluffy bathrobes and warm, spicy atmosphere there that I often buy an evening pass and loll by the koi pool with Ali and Liz, or bubble like a new potato in the spa bath. How many people have this on their doorstep? At lunchtimes I stroll on to the piazza and watch the jugglers, or browse the stalls in the covered market before popping into a coffee shop for a latte. Heaven. Who could ask for more?

But recently I've been yearning for something different. Cool colours, teen fashions and boy bands are starting to pall. It's that Radio 4 thing again. I'll be fantasising about magazines with cookery pages and knitting patterns soon if I'm not careful!

'You need to get off your arse and get promoted,' Ali was constantly telling me. 'You're too comfortable here. You need a new challenge. *Senora* wants an art director. That job has your name on it, babe.'

'Am I up to it?' I kept wondering. '*Senora* is right up there with *Marie Claire* and *Vogue*.'

'You'll piss all over it,' Ali snorted. 'I don't want to lose you, but you're ready for bigger things. Bike your CV over to them and I'll write you the best bloody reference Evangeline St Stick Insect has ever seen.'

So I applied for the job, and Ali was as good as her word and wrote me a reference so glowing I needed Raybans to read it, which is how I've ended up being interrogated by the editorial team of *Senora* and finding that I can answer their questions easily and have no problem making a presentation of my vision for their publication. Eventually I grind to a halt, the room swims back into focus and I discover that my interrogators are nodding and smiling.

'Do you have an interest in fashion?' asks Evangeline, steepling her fingers under her chin and sweeping her gaze over my suit. 'Is it your passion?'

Actually, I find the world of size-zero fashion models repellent, but now is probably not the time to share this thought. I open my mouth to give my rehearsed answer, something along the lines of living for fashion and longing to channel this into a creative force for *Senora*, but I'm pipped at the post by a cropped-haired man sporting trendy NHS-style glasses and a tan so orange it could be seen from the moon. He's none other than Quentin Olsen, the magazine's fashion director, well known in the industry as Queen Quentin, and I brace myself for an acerbic and bitchy deconstruction of my

outfit. It's as clear as the designer stubble on his chin that my knowledge of fashion is very definitely size zero.

Oh crap. I've tried my best, but I'm about to be revealed for the fraud that I so clearly am. What a shame. For a moment I almost thought I stood a chance.

'Look at the girl! Just *look* at her!' trills Quentin, leaning forward and jabbing a finger in my direction. 'Do you *need* to even ask whether or not she *lives* for fashion?'

I'm a bit offended, actually. I don't think I look *that* bad. At *Blush!*, lots of the juniors are always asking where I buy my clothes.

Oh dear, maybe it's so they can avoid those shops?

'Just *look* at her eye make-up,' Quentin is gasping. 'So smoky. So sooty. So now!'

I goggle at him. Surely he means so smudged?

'And as for the suit!' He beams at me. 'I just *adore* it. What a colour! How did you know?'

'Know what?' I ask. I'm confused for a split second, and then I realise that I'm dreaming. What a bummer. I'll wake up in a minute and have to go through this whole charade again. Great.

'That pink is the new black,' says Evangeline sagely, while her minions nod and mentally scribble this down. 'Quentin is absolutely right; you're quite obviously a young woman with her finger on the pulse of the fashion industry. That's exactly what we need in our art director, somebody innovative and cutting edge just like you.'

I'm speechless. Are they all mental?

'So,' Evangeline lowers my portfolio and twitches her frozen lips into her version of a smile, 'there's no point wasting time. Amber, welcome to *Senora.* You're hired.'

Now this is the point where the alarm should shrill, Ed should leap out of bed as though he's been wired to the mains while I surface to the strains of John Humphrys bullying politicians. But instead everyone's shaking my hand and congratulating me, Quentin's asking where I found my boots and

the pretty Chinese girl is exclaiming over the colour of my suit. I pinch myself hard and only get a bruise for my trouble.

Flipping heck! It appears that I really *am* the new art director of *Senora* magazine.

I can hardly wait to call Ed and tell him. He'll be over the moon. We're not exactly on the breadline, the rareness of poor solicitors equating with that of dead donkeys, but the mortgage on our pretty mews house in Clapham is definitely taking its toll. I've become so adept at juggling figures and switching credit cards that I could probably get a slot with the street entertainers in the piazza. It's going to be really nice, I think as the HR manager discusses my amazing new salary, to be able to contribute a bit more to our finances. Maybe we can even start planning our wedding at last.

Not that I don't already contribute to our finances. Far from it, actually, but there never seems to be enough left over for me once Waitrose, the council tax, Barclaycard and all the bills have taken their share. And after the standing orders have gone out, I make church mice look like the Beckhams. Although Ed would be happy to shoulder most of the bills, and, I sometimes worry, *more* than happy if I gave up work altogether and chained myself to the kitchen sink, there's something about being totally reliant on a man, even one I love, that makes me nervous.

I suppose seeing your dad walk out on your mum has that effect on a girl.

'For God's sake,' Ed often sighs, 'we're engaged, aren't we? Do you think my mother has a problem with my dad supporting her?'

I have to bite my tongue hard to refrain from pointing out that his parents live in a 1950s time warp and that as far as Mrs White is concerned, feminism is something rather unpleasant that happened to other people. Such subversive ideologies have yet to reach her little corner of Surrey. If I hear any more concrete-heavy hints about weddings and babies, I'll probably throttle the woman with her Hermès scarf. I hardly think

Evangeline St Anthony will be particularly impressed if I swan off on honeymoon swiftly followed by six months' maternity leave; besides, varicose veins and swollen ankles are so *not* the new black. Ed's mum will just have to wait.

Why, I wonder as I brandish my Oyster card at the ticket barrier, is it so difficult to have it all if you're a woman?

Down in the bowels of the tube, the strains of a busker picking out 'Cavatina' drift by on a rush of warm air. I toss a coin into an open guitar case and pick up speed, almost falling down the final steps when I hear the whine of my train. Diving through the throng of disembarking passengers, I plummet into a carriage, squash myself against the doors and tuck my face neatly into a stranger's armpit. Oh the pleasures of London life! Along the tracks the tube rattles, lights flickering on and off and all of us passengers swaying drunkenly with the movement. Sardines in a tin probably have more room.

It isn't that I don't want to be married or have a baby. Of course I do, one day. But this new job's going to be so exciting, and I can hardly wait to start. Ali's right; it really is the perfect opportunity for me to make my mark in the world of magazine journalism. Who knows, maybe one day it'll be me sitting in Evangeline's seat, interviewing trembling minions. I'll lean forward and utter wisely that black is the new pink, and I'll make everyone wear smudgy black mascara. Even the men! Well, OK then, maybe not the men; with the possible exception of Johnny Depp, I've yet to see a man who looks good in make-up.

Hmm, maybe I could stipulate that all male employees dress like Captain Jack Sparrow?

Deep in this pleasant daydream, where dashing young men with long dark gypsy curls and tight breeches hang on my every word, I begin to feel a bit disloyal, because Ed is sandy-haired and about as unlike Johnny Depp as it's possible to be. Very cute in his own way, obviously, but in a clean-cut public-schoolboy un-piratey manner, which I'm sure is much more use in day-to-day life. Who could imagine Captain Jack

Sparrow in a suit and carrying a briefcase? Swashbuckling is all well and good, but I can't imagine it would pay a Clapham mortgage.

I tear myself away from these disloyal thoughts and glance across the carriage, catching sight of my reflection, flatteringly blurred by the double-glazed glass. Who would ever have thought that that small girl with the shocking pink suit and the unruly hair was actually the senior art director at Britain's top glossy magazine?

I can hardly believe it myself!

Ed's going to be so proud of what I've achieved. He'll be pleased for me even if it does set his plans back a year or two. We can afford a really great wedding now. Maybe we can even jet off to the Maldives and have a small romantic ceremony there.

Without his mother . . .

Once I get a mobile signal, I'll book us a table at the little Italian trattoria he loves and have them put the champagne on ice. Then we can discuss all the lovely ways that we can spend my big fat new salary.

We are going to celebrate in style!