

**Grace has had a bad time with what she calls an ‘obnoxious American’ on one of her art gallery tours. Later her boss brings the American into the office and Grace discovers that he has been hired to join the company as a tour guide.**

‘It’s Grace, not Gracie,’ she said, but Tate Jefferson gave no indication of having heard her. She was going to repeat it, but decided she could not summon up enough politeness to make it sound anything less than aggressive. She smiled serenely instead, as if she was pleased to see him again, but her heart was somewhere at the back of her throat and her mind already laying out the framework for a coping strategy, some way of minimising the presence of this disturbing, memory-stirring, testosterone-exuding man grinning away at her.

She continued to smile serenely as Alistair made a speech about how it was a new era, how he’d had to think hard about ways to widen the company’s appeal and how Tate (boyish slap on the blond guy’s back) would attract a completely different group of clients.

‘Tate,’ Alistair said, laying down his briefcase, ‘will do more cutting-edge tours, show people the up-and-coming artists – even the ones no one has heard of yet. It’ll be contemporary, in your face, challenging.’

He rocked back on his heels and executed a weird kind of swing at an invisible baseball with an invisible bat which Grace assumed was a movement

designed to make him seem go-getting and modern. It was as embarrassing as watching your Dad grooving his way on to the dance floor at a wedding.

There was the slightest of double-takes from Tate at Alistair's puzzling body language, and then he turned his attention back to Grace. Suddenly his hand was out towards her for shaking. It was the hand with the silver ring.

She took it graciously and refused to listen to any of the nerves in her body and what they were shouting at her. One shake and she would drop this unsettling hand, but its owner seemed quite happy to let it linger round hers.

'What's Tate short for?' she asked, trying to pull her hand free. 'Mutate?'

'Grace!' Alistair said, but her words had the desired effect on Tate: she felt him let go of her hand as he laughed.

'Gracie's pissed with me,' he said, turning to Alistair. 'We had a run-in earlier. You know you suggested I tag along on a tour, see how they're done? Well, I tagged along with Gracie.'

'Grace.'

'And, well, cut to the chase, we didn't see eye to eye.'

'Ah,' Gilbert said getting up. 'So you're the obnoxious, opinionated American Grace was telling me about?'

Tate looked down at his boots and then back up at Gilbert.

'Yeah, guilty of that.' He did not look guilty at all. His hand was out again and Gilbert came over and shook it with every appearance of being amused.

‘I suspect Tate is short for Tate Modern, hmm?’ Gilbert said. ‘Or have you heard that a million times?’

‘A million and one times now.’

They both laughed, before Tate added, ‘Suppose you get people asking if you’re one half of Gilbert and George?’

‘Only once.’

There was more laughter and Grace wondered what Gilbert was doing? That ready handshake felt like disloyalty towards her somehow, the jokey chat almost as if he were flirting. And Alistair: was he mad? What had possessed him to hire this brash idiot? This was all wrong ... wrong! Didn’t they see how disruptive a guy like this would be? How threatening to the smooth running of... everything?

And how was she going to consign ‘the blond guy’ to the dumping-ground section of her brain if, at this very moment, he had a name and was standing in the office, by her desk, chatting and looking like he felt at home?

She needed some time to get her composure back.

‘I’ll make us all tea,’ she said and before either Gilbert or Alistair could stop her, she had plugged the kettle in again and switched it on.

There was a ‘phutt’ noise and everyone disappeared into calm cloaking black.

Grace could hear Alistair huffing away, how could she forget so soon that the kettle was faulty? Gilbert joked about Tate needing to get used to being kept

in the dark in this company, which Alistair responded to with something blustery before Tate cut in with, 'Hey Gracie, think you got your night-time routine turned around. You put me to sleep this afternoon, now you're turning the lights off. What next? You gonna do some tucking into bed?'

However soothing the dark was, it couldn't stop Grace feeling aggrieved by that smug familiarity, and she turned in Tate's direction and pulled a face before doing the 'penis on the forehead' mime for a dickhead. It felt pretty good, until there was the sound of a match being struck and Tate's head and shoulders were illuminated in a glow of light. She wasn't sure she'd put her hand down quickly enough to avoid her rude gesture being spotted.

The match burned down and they were back in the dark.

'I'll get the torch,' she said, fumbling for her desk and all at once, being in the dark didn't seem such a good idea. Someone was moving; she could hear them. She worked her way around her desk, her hands feeling clammy, and Gilbert started to whistle. He sounded as if he were still standing right where he had been when the lights went out. She listened again. Someone was definitely moving around - there was the scuff of a shoe, or a boot, on the carpet not far from her.

'Remind me to take that kettle out with the rubbish when I go tonight, Alistair,' she said, just to gauge from his answer where he was now standing.

Exactly where he'd been before, judging by the uninterested, 'Right,' she got back.

Pulse ricocheting about, she bent down quickly and grabbed the handle on the middle drawer and pulled. She felt for the torch and then squawked.

Someone had just blown in her right ear.

‘What’s the matter, now?’ Alistair called.

‘Nothing, nothing,’ she said swiping through the dark off to her right with her hand, but only connecting with air. ‘I touched something sharp in the drawer. No damage done.’

This time she managed to get the torch and held it in her not very steady hand to turn it on. In the beam she could see that Alistair and Gilbert were indeed where they had been when the lights went off, but Tate was closer to her desk. His face was a lesson in how to look innocent.