

Gracie and the Bad Hat

by Vicki Gaia

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A bad hat: a person who deliberately stirs up mischief and commotion.

Chapter One

Grace O'Shaughnessy was naked.

The photographer she met last night slept curved into her side, his thighs pressed against her legs, his arm flung over her chest. A smile warmed his face, but her stomach felt like ice.

Grace lifted the sheet to take a peek, and a groan escaped her.

Yes, buck naked and tangled up in a man's plaid robe, her black straw hat crushed between the pillows.

The sour aftertaste of too much merlot tainted her mouth, and she touched her forehead, a headache snaking up her neck. Grace gingerly moved his arm off her chest. Sweat and heat stung her skin, and the ghost of his touch kept her off balance. It took all of her effort to stay focused on what she had to do.

Grace swung her legs over the edge of the bed, clutching the robe to her chest. The shock of cold air nipped at her toes. She slipped out between the sheets, barely missing a pile of blankets and pillows arranged on the floor. Careful to step around the tangled bedding, she noted her surroundings.

Morning sunlight squeezed through the frosted windows and cast a gray light that did nothing to dispel the gloom. Not too successful earning his living as a photographer, the studio the antithesis of a romantic loft so popular with the city's urban professionals.

Wallpaper, faded with age, curled off the walls. The furnishings sparse - a Murphy bed, plain square nightstand, scarred wood table, and two chairs she remembered him saying he'd fished out of the bay. Was he kidding? From the looks of it, she didn't think so.

When Grace lifted her hat, he rolled over, let out a sharp snort and burrowed his head in his pillow. Now was her chance to escape. After scooping up her clothes and purse from the floor, she made a beeline to the bathroom.

Grace closed the bathroom door before dropping the robe to the floor. Standing naked in front of the sink, she turned on the faucet. The cold water refreshed her but the drawn face staring back from the cracked mirror horrified her - bloodshot eyes, hair matted to one side of her head, a flushed complexion.

She opened the medicine cabinet hoping to find a bottle of aspirin. Instead, she found a shelf crammed with blue Trojan boxes. Obviously, a long line of women visited the man's bed. Or maybe, he'd hoped to get lucky. With any luck, she had sense to use one of these condoms he'd stored so expectantly in his cabinet.

The remaining shelves held a box of bandages, two toothbrushes (one wrapped in its cellophane box) and a tube of toothpaste. She closed the cabinet door.

A razor leaned against the glass shelf alongside a can of shaving cream and a bottle of aftershave. Grace brought the bottle to her nose, and took a whiff, the brisk scent evoking the smell of his skin. A mouthwatering fragrance, reminding her of ocean spray and days spent in the sun. Cranking up the 'cold' on the faucet, she splashed her burning cheeks. She had to get out of here, and quick, before she crawled back into bed and demanded satisfaction, not remembering one second of their lovemaking.

Grace zipped up her wrinkled dress and wadded up her nylons, stuffing them into her purse. She tugged her hat over her unruly hair. This hat had gotten her into this mess. The photographer had approached her to compliment her on its delicate rose trim and the way it framed her face. He'd seduced with his smooth words and arresting face. And like an idiot, she fell for his affectionate manner.

Ready to leave, Grace opened the bathroom door and peeked out. The photographer remained in his position on the bed. Safe to make her exit, she tiptoed toward the front door, slipped on her shoes, and almost escaped.

"Gracie, you're leaving without saying goodbye?"

With her hand frozen on the doorknob, her purse slipped to the floor, the contents spilling out across the carpet.

Black silk panties draped from his hand, his mouth curved into a wry grin. "Forgetting something?"

Grace's shoulders sagged. "You can keep them. Think of them as a souvenir."

"You think I invited you here to add a notch to my bedpost? Although I don't have a bedpost. Might be a problem."

The man had some nerve taunting her.

"I don't think anything about last night," she snapped.

His glacial eyes narrowed. Oh yes, those calculating, intelligent eyes snagged her into submission. Her mother would call him a bad hat - an unreliable man who fooled around. Worst yet, he lived in the seediest neighborhood in San Francisco.

Grace snatched the panties from his hand. When his fingernails grazed her palm, a flutter in her stomach cautioned her to be careful.

"What do you think happened last night?" he asked.

"I...I need to go."