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# DEADLY GUESTS

TEN STORIES

Chris Fortunato



Close To The Bone Publishing

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# DEADLY GUESTS



# The Boot Scraper

Prescott knew he was guilty of criticizing Angela for little things such as spending too much time talking to people. Too much chatter. Too much wasted energy. Too much self-effacement. He wanted to scream. Angela, just as combative, observed how he seemed to do much of his freelance marketing while lying on the couch with a book opened on his chest. Although she had retained the lithe athleticism of youth, which had drawn him to her years ago, Angela had taken on the brittle, acerbic nature of a determined older woman, which Prescott appreciated but detested just the same.

Turning sixty had not been easy for either of them. The best is past, and despite panegyrics to the contrary, everyone crossing the threshold to being sixty years old knows they are heading to their doom. Prescott felt acutely that he was in the land of the invisible where nobody saw or appreciated what was happening to him or that given the opportunity he might have the ability to glow with vitality once again. Like every sixty-year-old, he wanted a do-over.

A long vacation provides a do-over or at least the illusion of one, which is why Prescott and Angela decided to go to Belle Harbor on the North Shore for a few weeks in the summer. It was where they had come soon after getting married fifteen years earlier, each for the second time. Sunshine, long walks on the beach, hours of reading, and afternoon glasses of wine all provided a sense of well-being with no end in sight. If such an atmosphere wielded its magic once, why couldn't it again?

Once they had arrived at Belle Harbor, the veranda of the Blue Heron Inn with its view of a long stretch of soft

sand caressed by the glistening ocean did little to allay Prescott's malaise. He realized right from the start that the vacation had given them an opportunity to pretend to be together while being apart. Maybe pretending was a form of healing, but at least they would both have to believe that illusion to make it true. The first morning, after a walk together on the beach, they went their separate ways. Angela was fond of crafts and sought inspiration from the innovative craftspeople who operated little shops in the resort community. Prescott gave himself the task of finding a boot scrapper for the front porch of their Colonial back in Arlington. Boot scrapers had been a front-porch fixture on big old New England houses years ago. The search for such an arcane item gave him a goal beyond the efforts of his supine work.

"You should go to the Yarnery," Angela said during the third evening they were there, as they sipped their cocktails. "They have an antique barn out in back with all sorts of old household things."

She was always thinking of Prescott like that, catering to his quirky interests in the midst of their unease, but he knew not to be deceived into thinking that he was contented when he wasn't.

The next day he went to the Yarnery, which occupied the downstairs of a two-story cape surrounded by lush red rose bushes. Skeins of colorful yarn filled large baskets situated all around the bright shop.

"May I help you?" The voice came from a distant corner of the shop. A young woman stopped her desultory work moving things around on a shelf and looked at him with one eye, the other hidden behind a cascade of blonde hair as bright as corn silk. She approached him with the steely elegance of a model on the catwalk.

“I heard you had a barn full of antiques out back,” Prescott said.

“Oh yes,” the woman replied, running her fingers through her hair so she could regard him with both eyes. “Just go through the back door here. You’ll see it. The barn door is wide open. Are you looking for anything in particular?”

“A boot scraper,” Prescott said like it was the most significant thing in the world. Today it was.

“I’m sure I have plenty of those,” the woman said with what Prescott thought was mocking civility. Seeking a household item out of style for a hundred years made Prescott feel old. He knew he should appreciate something that would relate to a woman as sultry and beautiful as the woman in front of him.

“I like the music you’re playing.”

The soft, ethereal intonations of a female vocalist wafted through the shop.

The woman’s smile in response was as soft and vague as the music. “There are a lot of boxes to go through,” she said softly.

He noticed her regarding him as he strolled through the back door. He knew that despite his years he cut a trim figure, and he was careful to maintain a closely shaved face and perfectly trimmed gray hair. Certain truisms coursed through his fervid brain, one being that beautiful women didn’t like men who looked like shaggy dogs.

The barn was just what Prescott had hoped it would be. Its dusty benches and shelves overflowed with bulging cardboard and wooden boxes, which were filled with all sorts of rusted metal objects. Nothing was a recognizable whole but a part of something else such as rotor blades for garden tillers or U-joints for sinks, all hoping to find renewed life in

imaginative hands. Prescott started inspecting a box filled with old kitchen utensils and small electrical parts.

A few minutes into Prescott's search through the metal rubble, he heard shouting from the yard. A man's voice rose in annoyance, his harsh cadences drowning out a woman's pleading objections and burying the insistent flow of heavenly music from the speakers. The man sounded old, much like Prescott felt he must sound when he complained to Angela. Yet the man was shouting. Prescott was proud that he never shouted; he just growled.

A minute later, the woman from the Yarnery stalked into the barn and walked up to Prescott.

"You heard that, didn't you?"

"What?" Prescott said, startled to see her appear suddenly behind him. "Yes, someone was shouting," he said at last, knowing that the woman was expecting something from him.

"That's Morris Sipp, my husband, I regret to say. He hasn't sold a painting in five years and today he blames it on the music I play in the store. All I play is Enya. I mean really." In the urgency of her imposition upon Prescott she exuded the moist perfume of youth, which spoke a language to Prescott that he desperately hoped he had not forgotten.

"I'm sorry" was all Prescott could think to say.

"He doesn't acknowledge that cursing out his art dealer five years ago and being an ogre to everyone might have something to do with his failure. You have to help me. I saw it in the cards this morning. Someone would come to free me from this tyranny."

Prescott looked at the woman's upturned face. He figured she was about thirty years old. Her sad eyes pleaded to him. The blood in his veins quickened as the dim light of the barn slashed shadows across her face, which was focused on him and him alone.

“What do you mean, exactly, by freeing you from this tyranny?” Prescott asked, at once regretting the pomposity of his phrasing.

“This,” she said, stepping up to him and planting her lips on his. She tasted sweet and fresh, and as she pressed into him, he felt the soft resiliency of her body. She kissed him hungrily and he matched her hunger with his own.

Finally, she pulled away. “He paints the same thing over and over. Nobody wants his depressing view of life. What a terrible mistake I made marrying him. He yells at me every day. I can’t take it a minute longer.”

“I’m sorry,” Prescott said.

“Stop saying sorry all the time,” she said. “You must do something about it for me.” She reached onto one of the shelves and handed him a heavy object. “Here’s your boot scraper. A home run to the back of the head should do the trick. His painting cabin is down a path in the woods behind the barn here. He’s drunk by five every afternoon. Wait till he goes outside to take a leak.”

Prescott was about to protest his involvement in a killing, yet the appealing glow in her eyes and her next urgent kiss stilled his qualms. This is what he had wished for, after all. Yet he had not wished for the seven labors of Hercules. That was what her request felt like.

He kissed her longingly, and as he embraced her supple bones, his lips grazed her cheek and he inhaled the girlish musk of her desire.

“We’ll be friends,” she gasped breathlessly. “I feel it. My name is Celeste, by the way.”

“Prescott,” he whispered into her fragrant hair, holding onto her a moment longer.

Celeste finally pulled away and repeated that she wanted the job done that evening. Prescott nodded his assurances, although he knew his silent assent was a way of being vague.

Then Celeste turned and raced from the barn and across the gravel drive and through the back door of the Yarnery. He had been dismissed capriciously. But was that any different from the uncertain and unintendedly cruel moments of first love? Pain and pleasure went together when it came to desire.

Prescott was left holding the cast iron boot scraper, which he placed on a shelf behind a coiled rusty winch chain. After all, he hadn't paid for it.

He had succumbed to the irresistible lure of a reckless golden girl, letting his unease with Angela inflame his wayward notions. He didn't want to murder anyone, but he didn't want to turn back from what had started so suddenly between Celeste and him.

That evening, as he and Angela sipped their cocktails at a local restaurant overlooking the beach, she asked him if he had found his boot scraper. Try as he might to keep his thoughts in the present, he could not erase the taste of Celeste's candied kisses on his lips. Suppressing his guilt, Prescott stated that he had not found any that he liked.

Angela raised her eyebrows over her gin and tonic. "I was certain you'd found something. A boot scraper is a boot scraper is a boot scraper," she said.

"Oh no, they're all different," he responded. At least he knew that a boot scraper given to you to be a murder weapon is different.

The evening went smoothly, although from time to time Prescott thought Angela was trying to bait him into a fight by saying how distant he was continuing to be. He knew he could go back to accusing her of wasting time with aimless, prolonged conversations with people she would never see again. But he refrained, deciding that he would visit Celeste the next day. He would try to have a serious talk with her to help her resolve her problems without resorting to murder

and lure her back into his arms with the forthright wisdom he presumed she sought from older men.

The following morning, after he and Angela walked on the beach and spent a dutiful hour reading on the screened piazza, Angela drifted off saying she wanted to check out a little shop she had discovered that sold candle holders made from polished beach stones. Prescott was relieved that the shop she wanted to visit was at least a quarter mile from the Yarnery.

When he walked into the shop, Celeste put her chin up and regarded him coolly.

“Go out to the back porch and I’ll meet you there,” she whispered.

A moment later, she was clutching him and thrusting her youthful body against his. “Thank you so much. It was perfect what you did.”

He hesitated before accepting her kiss. “What did I do?”

“Oh, you’re a shrewd one, but I wouldn’t have it any other way. You got rid of Morris Sipp for me. Nice and clean. Thank you, my darling.”

“What do you mean?” he said.

“I discovered his body up near the cabin early this morning. He’s a goner, that’s for sure. Looks like he slipped and something hard hit the back of his head.”

“I didn’t do it, Celeste,” Prescott said.

“Of course, you did, silly. Now kiss me.”

She grasped the back of his head and brought her soft, moist lips up to his. A thrill surged through him and quickened his blood.

“Honestly, Celeste,” he said, coming up for air. “I didn’t kill your husband.” Prescott was in the enviable position of being rewarded for something he didn’t do, yet in grasping his ill-gotten reward he began to feel as guilty as if he had dispatched the dyspeptic Morris Sipp.