

**THE
COUNTY
MURDERS**

J. D. CARPENTER

Cressy Lakeside



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Bright's Kill
74 Miles Away
Twelve Trees
The County Murders

For Karen

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I heard a sharp cough. Then a violent retching.
There was a small thud on the floor, as if a thick
glass had fallen....

— Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep*

1

THE MIDNIGHT FEAST

As part of the great urban exodus, Keith Gibson, retired stockbroker, moved from his slim condo in the fashionable Annex neighbourhood of Toronto to a red brick ‘century’ farmhouse on twenty acres of land just outside the eastern Ontario town of Saybrook (pop. 4000), where, in short order, he established Lost Lake Winery – the initial planting of twelve hundred vines included Cabernet Franc, Baco noir, Pinot noir, Pinot gris, Chardonnay, and Vidal – and made inroads into the local social life: he joined a bridge club, a businessman’s club, an antique car club, and the film society, played his guitar every Sunday afternoon at the Saybrook Nursing Home, and spearheaded a campaign to raise money for a magnetic resonance imaging scanner for the hospital. He was regularly invited to dinner parties and included on guest lists for fund raisers and theme dances. He became so active in

the burgeoning wine industry that within five years of his arrival he was elected president of the Prince Edward County Oenophile Society, and on December 31, 2011, he was the star attraction at the society's New Year's Eve Midnight Feast at the Saybrook Yacht Club.

Everyone who was anyone was there – Mayor Walter Maxwell, Father Declan O'Connor of St. Quinlan's Catholic Church, the town's doctors and dentists and lawyers, the fire chief, the funeral director, the Toyota dealer, as well as the president and several members of the local chapter of the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire.

Seated with Keith and his girlfriend, Danielle Granatstein, at Table 1 were Bradley Pogue – early forties, retired software guru – who owned and operated La Grenouille Winery and was vice-president of the Oenophile Society, and his Russian bride, Zizi; Steve and Barb Helms, County-born-and-raised real estate agents; and me, Joe Horn, lead reporter – correction: only reporter – with Saybrook's twice-weekly newspaper, the *Independent* – or *Indy*, as it's known around here – and my girlfriend, Shelley Maracle, assistant librarian at the Saybrook Public Library.

The conversation at our table was slow to gather steam, but by the time we had consumed the hors d'oeuvres – “Smoked Salmon Mousse on Potato Crisps, served with Champagne” – the appetizer – “Goat Cheese Medallions with Slivers of Brazil Nut and Sun Dried Tomato Tapenade” – the soup – “Prince Edward County Apple, Sage and Onion Soup with Saybrook Cheddar and Bacon Croutons” – and were enjoying a respite before the entrée, Keith and

Brad had already exhausted the subject of vineyard pesticides and had moved on to the local cement plant's propensity to pollute; Steve had moved on to the bar; Shelley had moved to Steve's chair where she and Barb were discussing grown children (“Our Tiffany,” Barb said, “didn't leave home 'til she was twenty-five, moved back when she was twenty-six, and now she's twenty-eight and *still* with us!”); Zizi was practicing her fledgling English (“I *love* ziss country!”) on the people at Table 5; and Danielle, sliding into Shelley's chair, said, “Do you know what I think, Joseph?”

Clad in a beaded pomegranate sheath, she was giving me a soulful gaze and an unobstructed view of her cleavage. I knew very little about her, except what I'd heard through the grapevine: she'd been an interior decorator in Toronto, attended yoga classes, was a member of the horticultural society, and thought highly of herself.

“I have no idea.”

“I think we should run away together.”

I smiled. “Shelley would never allow it. Excuse me, please,” I said, stood up, and walked across the dance floor to the bar, where I joined Steve. “So,” I said, “sold any houses lately?”

Steve turned his heavy head towards me. “I'll make you a bet.”

“What kind of bet?”

“Five bucks says my wife is right now talking somebody's ear off.”

I turned and looked back at Table 1. “She's talking to Shelley.”

Steve nodded at his drink on the bar. “Probably talking about our overweight, unmarried daughter. Anyway, to answer your question, no, I haven’t sold any houses lately. The market’s flat right now – nothing’s moving – so Barb’s decided we should advertise more.”

“I’ve seen your ads in the flyers –”

“Those were her idea – our smiling faces superimposed over vacant land.”

“You sound sort of cynical.”

Steve studied me. “You’re new around here, right?”

“I’ve been here three years.”

“Like I said, you’re new around here. You don’t know how it feels to be treated like a traitor by the people you grew up with.”

“Why do they treat you –”

“Because we buy up useless land – scrub land – get Town Council to re-zone it residential, then sell it to city folks like the mighty Keith Gibson for ten times what it’s worth.”

“It’s worth what people are willing to pay, isn’t it?”

“A lot of the local folk think we’re betraying our County roots, but you know what I say? I say we wouldn’t be able to buy it if the local folk that own it weren’t willing to sell it.”

“Besides, it’s good for the economy to have new –”

“Anymore, the only people who’ll have anything to do with us are Council members and fellow Fishers.”

“Fellow fishers?”

He looked at me as if I was weak of mind. “Loyal Order of Fishers. It’s a businessmen’s club.”

I laughed. “Sorry – I heard the ‘f’ as lower case, as in *fishers*. You know – weasels. Your fellow weasels.”

He looked at me suspiciously. “So as I was saying, if all those people who hate us had been a little more ambitious and taken the realtor’s course instead of going to work at the cement plant they’d be doing exactly the same thing we’re doing.” He lifted his glass and emptied it. “These days, shoreline’s dearest.”

“Given that the County’s pretty much an island, am I right in thinking there can’t be much shoreline left that hasn’t been bought up?”

“There’s a few old farmers still hanging on – they’d rather die than part with it.”

“That must annoy you.”

The bartender said, “May I get you something, sir?”

“Pint of Glenora, please.”

“While you’re up,” Steve said to the bartender, rattling the ice cubes in his glass.

When I returned to our table, Shelley had vanished, Brad Pogue was sitting in my chair looking down the front of Danielle’s dress, Barb was sitting knee to knee with Keith Gibson, saying, “Steve and I were married at eighteen and parents at *twenty*, for God’s sake,” and Fuzzy Duke, one of Saybrook’s special needs residents – he has Down syndrome – was on his knees in front of Barb sweeping up pieces of broken glass with a dustpan and brush.

“What happened here?” I asked.

Fuzzy looked up. “The lady,” he said, then frowned and bent back down.

“It was completely my fault,” Barb said. “I was expressing myself rather dramatically, I’m afraid –”

“You were gesticulating,” Keith said.

“Whatever, and I knocked my glass flying, I got wine all over my blouse, but fortunately we’re still on the whites!” She laughed.

“Wine’s a hazard,” said Fuzzy.

Shelley reappeared.

“There you are,” I said.

She tugged at the sleeve of my rented tux and I inclined my head. “Is it just me,” she whispered in my ear, “or did we end up at the table reserved for awful people?”

At two minutes to midnight, Keith walked to the front of the ballroom where the disc jockey was setting up his equipment, tapped the microphone with a knuckle, and, resplendent in his chocolate, two-button, notch-lapel tuxedo, said, “Welcome everyone to the Prince Edward County Oenophile Society’s eighth annual New Year’s Eve Midnight Feast! Right now” – he checked his wristwatch – “it’s exactly 11:58 and ... fifty-one seconds, and a minute from now we’ll usher in the new year, raise a glass of champagne, hug and kiss our friends – discreetly, of course! – sing ‘Auld Lang Syne’, then sit back down for the fabulous entrée. The menu, by the way, was created by my darling Danielle, whom you all know and love almost as much as I do” – he waited for the applause to abate – “and for my part” – here he bowed slightly – “I humbly take responsibility for the wine selection, which features both imported and local vintages. Enjoy, everyone! Enjoy!”

After the festivities – the countdown to midnight, the toast, the singing and hugging and kissing, during which Steve was unaccounted for and Barb kissed Keith on the mouth right in front of Danielle – we returned to

our places, and the waiters began to serve the entrée – “Grill Seared Filet of Beef with Root Vegetable Medley, Red Wine Reduction, and Shallot Tarragon Butter, served with La Grenouille Cabernet Franc.”

When the waiter had finished half-filling the wineglasses at Table 1, Keith raised his left hand until he had the attention of his table-mates, held his glass up to the light with his right hand, said, “Good ruby colour,” lowered it, swirled the contents, tilted the glass, inserted his nose into its mouth, closed his eyes, sniffed slightly, said, “Very nice,” took a small sip, made a low gargling sound, juggled the wine against his palate, and said, “Very very nice! Hints of red currant, milk chocolate, roasted almonds, saddle leather, tobacco ... pencil shavings ... and, let’s see ... scorched earth.”

He took a second, deeper draught of the wine, chewed on it for a while, swallowed, and said, “Congratulations, Brad.”

Across the table, Brad Pogue bowed his head. “Your descriptors are most apt, except perhaps for the last one. To me, the taste is subtle, more like forest floor than forest fire.”

Keith’s smile tightened. “Well, you should know, you’re the vintner.” He picked up his knife and fork. “All right, everyone, *bon appetit!*” He had no sooner speared a slice of yam, however, than he went pale as a parsnip, stood up, leaned down to Danielle’s ear, said, “Excuse me, my dear, nature calls,” and hurried off across the dance floor.

* * *

Keith Gibson and I had known each other casually for two years, but in the past six months our friendship had graduated to a new level.

Last summer Keith phoned me at work and asked if I would be interested in joining the Oenophile Society. “I overheard you ordering a bottle of wine at the Cork last week,” he said. “I was at the next table with Brendan Pendergast.”

“I remember.”

“It struck me that you knew what you were talking about.”

“Really? What did I say?”

“Oh, some bullshit about Chilean carmenères.”

“My sources tell me they’re the in-thing.”

“For the moment, perhaps, but tell me – *do* you know what you’re talking about?”

“Not really. I know what I like.”

“Good enough for me. What I’m looking for is fresh blood. As it is, our membership’s too much comprised of complacent old rich bastards, and the last thing they want to do is make themselves useful. For one thing, we need a secretary – someone to takes notes during our meetings. I thought with your journalistic skills you’d be a natural.”

“As a full-time journalist, Keith, I hardly have time to wipe my ass let alone join a wine society.”

“What about treasurer? The one we’ve got keeps forgetting where he’s put the ledger. I don’t think he’s heard of computers, and I’m pretty sure he’s got Alzheimer’s. Do you want the job? Strictly voluntary, of course. Think of it as giving back to the community.”

“It’s very kind of you, but I really don’t have the time –”

“Listen, the treasurer part is simple. I just thought you might like an excuse to drink some vino. *Good vino*. What do you say? I’m giving you a chance to change your mind.”

“I’ll think about it.”

A week later Keith phoned again, this time to invite me to lunch at the Cork Lounge. Paneled in dark wood and tastefully appointed, it’s the restaurant favoured by the town’s elite. When the waiter – black shirt, white tie – asked if we would like to see menus, Keith said, “Not necessary, we’ll both have the chicken lasagna and your wonderful garlic bread.” He turned to me. “All right with you?”

“Fine.”

Keith turned back to the waiter. “Do you have any more of that Napa Valley First Press Chardonnay?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good, stick a bottle in the freezer for ten minutes.”

After the waiter had filled our water glasses and left to place our orders, Keith said, “Only thing I don’t like about this place, they don’t serve their wines at the proper temp.”

I said, “Don’t you make a Chardonnay yourself?”

“Indeed I do – Lost Lake ‘Danielle’s Block’ – and, as a matter of fact, it’s available here.”

“Well, I suppose you can drink all you want at home for free.”

“No, the reason I don’t order my own wine is because it’s crap compared to the wine I just ordered, and the wine I just ordered is two dollars cheaper than *my* wine!”

As we waited for our meals, Keith talked about the pitfalls of operating a vineyard. “For starters,” he said,

“you have to learn all the rules. How much imported juice you can use for the first few years while your vines are establishing themselves. Which grapes you can blend, and in what proportions. Where to buy your supplies. Which other vintners in the area are willing to act cooperatively, which ones are mavericks, which ones are egomaniacs.” He took a sip of water. “Actually, we’re *all* egomaniacs, but I shouldn’t tell you that – I don’t want to scare you off. And I certainly don’t want you to write anything that reflects discredit on me in that scandal sheet of yours. By the way, have you thought any further about my offer?”

“I have and I’m grateful for your confidence, but the answer’s no.”

“Well, shit.”

“The answer was no when you first made the offer – as I told you over the phone – but you persisted, so I figured I could score a free lunch before I officially announced my decision” – I swept my hand over the table – “*et voilà!*”

Keith smiled, his eyes as grey as steel. “Very few people say no to me, but I like your forthrightness and hereby invite you – you and your significant other, assuming you have one – to be my guests next New Year’s at the Oenophile Society bash.”

The waiter brought the bottle of Napa Valley to our table, showed Keith the label, Keith felt the bottle to make sure it was chilled to his satisfaction, nodded, the waiter uncorked the bottle, poured a small amount into Keith’s glass, Keith swirled it, sniffed it, and tasted it. “Ah,” he said, “hints of grapefruit, Granny Smith, and unsalted butter.”

* * *

The conversation at Table 1 had picked up: the controversy over wind turbines; a recent snowmobiling accident that killed a local woman; Town Council’s decision to bail out two County entrepreneurs whose businesses – a mini-putt/putting zoo and a tanning salon/personal trainer/exercise gym – were failing, while ignoring the plight of local bar and restaurant owners for whom the newly invoked smoking bylaw was driving away their clientele, and local farmers who were struggling to keep their heads above water as beef prices sank.

“It’s like anything else,” Brad Pogue said, brandishing his wine glass like a conductor’s baton. “It’s who you know. Unfortunately for the farmers, they’re not connected. To my knowledge, hardly any of them belong to the Fishers – not that they wouldn’t be welcome –”

“They don’t have time,” Shelley interjected. “They’re too busy milking cows and bringing in hay to hobnob with the idle rich at the Cork Lounge.”

“The bottom line,” Brad continued, “is they don’t have friends in high places.”

“Well, they should,” said Shelley, whose cheeks were approximating the colour of the cab franc. “Everyone deserves equal representation. And after all, where would we be without farmers? Where would we get our food?”

Danielle, her shapely chin resting on the ham of one hand, said, “We have a farmer, but he smells bad, doesn’t he, Keith?”

But Keith hadn't returned. Danielle raised her head and, patting her plum-coloured pixie cut, scanned the room. "Where's he got to? Talking to some high mucky-muck, I suppose."

Shelley said, "I'm sure your farmer would smell better if he was a doctor or a lawyer. The smell comes with the territory – manure, et cetera."

Danielle turned to her. "No, that's not it. The man grew up in squalor, has a long-standing and time-honoured attachment to squalor, and understands nothing *but* squalor. Not to mention an aversion to water. Quite simply, he would never fit in amongst the idle rich – as you so quaintly refer to people like me."

I turned to Shelley, saw the look on her face, and said, "I worked as a farmhand when I was young. Couldn't help but smell."

But the damage was done, and Shelley was silent for the rest of the meal while Danielle, stretching her arms languorously, said things like, "What we *need* in this backwater is a properly papered masseur."

Keith still hadn't returned when dessert – "Chocolate Lava Cakes with Cappuccino Foam" – was served. "Where the hell is he?" Danielle complained. "I'm going to have to send out a search party."

The disc jockey started the music. I took off my jacket, draped it across my chair-back, grabbed Shelley's hand, and pulled her onto the dance floor. Giant *papier-maché* corks, pink and silver and lime, hung from the ceiling, and the walls were decorated with blown-up wine bottle labels.

I gathered her in my arms. "You're so beautiful."
"I don't feel like dancing."

"But it's New Year's."

"You heard what that horrible woman said to me."

"Oh, come on, you know the type. We've seen them a thousand times. Fading beauties, they have to make an impression, and since they can't get by on their looks anymore, they have to say outrageous things. Besides, she's drunk."

"Explain it away all you want, I take it personally."

"Imagine trying to live with her. Poor Keith."

"Poor Keith! What about me? I'm the one she insulted."

"Let it go, sweetheart. That's Percy Sledge we're dancing to."

"Nervy bitch."

"Please – for me?"

I had just started to croon into her ear when she said, "She's right about one thing though – Keith's been gone a long time."

"I'm sure he's fine."

She stopped dancing. "No, really, maybe he's sick – he was white as a ghost when he left the table. I think you'd better see if he's all right."

"Fine, but don't go anywhere – I'm going to ask the guy to play some Sam Cooke."

The men's room was a short distance down the hall. I pushed open the door and looked around. No sign of anyone, let alone Keith. I was about to leave when I noticed that the door to one of the cubicles was closed.

"Keith?" I said.

No response. I squatted down and peeked under the door. Someone was sitting on the floor beside the toilet.

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“Keith?” I repeated.

Still no response. I tried the door. It was locked, but I gave it a good shove and it opened. Keith was sitting with his back against the wall. His shoulders were hunched forward and his head was hanging down. Undigested appetizers coated the left sleeve of his white Hathaway, and a yellow string of saliva was descending from his lower lip and coiling like a hawser on the thigh of his trousers.

“You okay, Keith?” I said. “You don’t look so good.”

He still didn’t answer. I got down on one knee in front of him and lifted his chin. His grey eyes were open and fixed, his mouth was frozen in a grimace, and his cheeks and forehead were cornflower blue.

The door to the men’s room swung open behind me. I stood up and stepped out of the cubicle.

Brad Pogue was standing at a urinal. He glanced over his shoulder. “Joe, I hope you don’t mind me saying so, but your woman’s fucking gorgeous.”

I pointed to the cubicle. “Keith’s in there,” I said. “I think he’s dead.”