

Indirection, In Wait

By Kieran Shea

Until that moment Carter Hayes never realized just how bad life could get.

Five feet away, David Campbell—Carter’s neighbor—was shot, rolled up, and bleeding through the coarse backing of a bolt of orange shag carpet like a grotesque enchilada. They were in a small, freezing garage cornered off by three mismatched men in their early thirties. The men referred to themselves as Justin, Marty, and Depp. Bad dental all around.

Depp was the group’s leader, a slop-bellied buzzcut who wore a purple Baltimore Ravens hoodie with khaki cargo shorts and military boots. His pale, surgically scarred knees were as wide as cantaloupes and Depp dipped deep from a puck of Copenhagen snuff. “D’hell you doin’, dumping trash on my property, friend?”

“We—”

The one named Marty stepped forward and clocked Carter on the skull from behind. It was the second starry jolt of the evening and Carter struggled on his feet. The pain razored sharp behind his ear, first hot and then cold with leaking blood.

Before Carter could assemble an answer, the oil-stained concrete swept up and folded one of his front teeth inward. Carter rolled onto his back with a groan and, aiming for the uprights, a boot from the one named Justin brought a welcome crush of darkness.

For now.

Several hours earlier, David Campbell handed Carter a bottle of beer.

“You followed them,” Carter said.

David tilted back his own bottle, sucking at it hard until half of the beer’s contents were down. David Campbell was a Mid-Atlantic sales rep for web-press printing conglomerate and had been fast-tracking his way into hardcore alcoholism for years.

“God damn right I did,” David answered.

Carter shifted against the grooved, marbled edge of his neighbor’s kitchen counter. Across the room in a leather-furnished den, a pair of sports commentators beamed muted yucks. The flat-screen television was as big as one the twin beds Carter’s kids used to sleep in when they were little. Some NCAA basketball highlights. Carter could’ve cared less.

“You were coming home from the airport and you just decided you’d follow them, just flat out follow them? Bunch of strangers, all the way from here in Annapolis down to Calvert County?”

“Yep.”

“At two in the morning?”

“Yep.”

Carter set his beer down on the counter with a soft click. He folded his arms. “You do realize that’s completely wacko, right?”

David threw back his head and shook it. “No, it isn’t. I was mad, maybe not thinking straight, but it’s not completely wacko.”

“Cripes. Did you get a look at their plate? Did you call the cops?”

“No.”

“You should’ve called the cops, man.”

“I didn’t call the cops, all right?”

“Not good...”

“Look. I’d just landed a late flight back to BWI from Logan. I got this client, up in Boston? Some snooty ad agency knocking my junk around on this ten month package deal they have going with NASCAR. Petty this, petty that, total scope creep. Anyway, this job has been running me ragged, so sue me if I was not in the best of moods. As if I have any control over a freak ice storm in Tennessee blowing their God damn delivery deadline. You have no idea.”

“Go on.”

Another glug of beer. “So I’m whipped and I’m thinking come home, rock a couple of Tylenol PMs, and sleep until noon because today? Hey, it’s Saturday, right? But these guys. These fucking guys. I drive up the road and here are these three tools dumping eight bald tires on a shoulder in our neighborhood. Right here! In a drainage ditch! We’re like spitting distance to The Chesapeake Bay Foundation for Christ’s sake. Just chucking them out, not a care in the world. I waited until they took off, doused my lights, and caught up with them. They headed northwest and then south toward Edgewater, you know, humming along but not speeding. After a while I swung off onto the shoulder near a convenience store and let another car bump up, put some space between us. Not like a truck like that would be hard to lose, I mean...God...you should’ve seen that thing. Total redneck rig, jacked a million miles high and a big ol’ Ravens static cling on the rear window and one of those Calvin & Hobbes decals pissing on a sailboat. Sucker just friggin’ breathes gasoline.”

“So did you or didn’t you get their plate?”

“Oh, I got it. Close to two hours of driving roundtrip? I got their plate all right.”

“Then call it in. You can report this sort of thing. Even if they’re all the way down in Calvert County, you can report them.”

“You’re not listening to me.”

“No, I am listening to you, David. You should hear yourself. You’re off the charts right now even considering something like this. I mean, does your wife know? Jesus—does Claire know you were driving all over southern Maryland chasing litterbugs in the middle of the night?”

David’s wife, Claire Campbell, was a copyright attorney in DC—a no-nonsense, hard case Pilates junkie who would have given David pause if not berated him into a cowering pout over doing something so juvenile. David grimaced and finished the rest of his beer.

“Claire? Pssh. Claire is in Palo Alto, amigo. Some big copyright case. They’ve her set up in a Hyatt for, I don’t know, like three weeks straight? She’s probably spending lots of time with the concierge’s recommended personal trainers and their hairy exercise balls. Just between us, things haven’t been exactly copasetic lately, you know, plumbing wise....”

God. Carter didn’t want to know.

David pawed into an overpriced plastic sack of multi-grain pretzels from Whole Foods and crunched a small haystack's worth in his mouth. He then plucked his third beer from the kitchen's refrigerator while Carter took a reflective swallow from his own.

"I've a plan," David said.

When Carter came to he discovered he was still coiled on the garage floor. He had the briefest of mental flashes that everything was just a wicked, bad dream brought on by mixing too much beer with his medications or something. But then David's body was still rolled up in the carpet and Depp glared mean from across the room. Justin and Marty had disappeared.

"He's awake! My man Lazarus back from the dead!"

Carter's head throbbed, but through a gluey, thumping dizziness he noticed how much bigger the blood stain in the carpet's backing was. Shaped kind of like Russia swelling into the 'Stans.

Depp drawled nasally, "Marty found you two's SUV."

Carter probed the tip of his tongue against his folded-in tooth and blinked at the eye-watering sting. There was a gritty, acidic taste in his mouth. Bile and old iron. Vomit and blood pooled next to his head.

"What?"

Depp continued, "Nice ride that X5. Probably performs on the open road and gets you lingering looks from the rich bitches and all, but a car like that? Don't work for shit in the muck. Not much man in that."

"It's David's BMW."

"Duh," Depp minced mockingly. "It's David's BMW. We know that, fuckwad. Got a whole bunch of information on you two trespassers now. Plus we have your cell phones. Everybody who knows you two? Guess what? We're friends and family now."

"Wha—why are you guys doing this?"

"You tell me. D'fuck you coming up on my property in the middle of the night for?"

"Us? You started this."

"Started what?"

"This! The tires!"

"The tires? By the tires you mean the ones you bringing onto my land?"

"You dumped them in our neighborhood first."

"Did not."

"You did! David saw you. He tracked you."

Unfazed, Depp shook his head, "I honestly have no idea what you're talking about."

Carter gasped disbelief. "But you—you—God, you didn't have to shoot him! You shot my neighbor over tires! That's insane! This is crazy! This isn't worth it!"

Depp turned from a tool bench cradling a shotgun and Carter clenched to control the dropping sensation in his bladder.

Nonchalantly, Depp loaded green-jacketed shells from a plain cardboard box that sat on the empty tool bench. Like a sentry, a red metal reloading press for shotgun shells was bolted to the wood beside him.

Carter grew up bird hunting with his grandfather and spent hours reloading shells using a similar press. And he knew what kind of gun Depp held, even though Carter himself hadn't been hunting in years. Back when he still had a life, Carter did a little online research, weighing home security options after a few localized break-ins. Came down to shotguns versus German Shepherds. Statistically speaking, having a shotgun in the house might make you more likely to have gun-related accident, but it sure as hell beat the pants off of plastic-bagging steaming shitsicles in January. The gun was Italian. A Benelli, semi-automatic, high capacity with a synthetic camouflaged finish. With the third shell loaded, Depp pressed a small black button and the breech slapped closed.

Depp jutted his chin at the carpet. "Your buddy here was kind of difficult. Cried like a baby. Just cried and cried and cried..."

"Don't..."

"We'll have that BMW broken down in a couple of days. Justin got himself a degree in auto mechanics and Marty? That guy is practically a ninja with a cutting torch. Parts on a ride like that? You two just paid me and my friends' bills for, like, a year. Shit, we might even throw us a party. Go fishing in Mexico. Margaritas and señoritas..."

Carter shut his eyes. "Please don't do this."

Depp laughed. The laugh was soulless. Wild.

Maybe if Carter's wife hadn't divorced him and the real estate market hadn't tanked, Carter wouldn't have still been living down the street from David Campbell. As it was, Carter lived in the hull of a house kept staged for potential buyers. When the house sold, his ex-wife would take the rest, just like she took his kids. At night in his socks and underwear, Carter wandered the vacant Colonial feeling like something between an intruder and a ghost.

Carter's physician encouraged him to see a psychiatrist to sort out the mental fallout from his divorce, so he did. His moods came and went, but he had to admit the sessions and the prescribed pharmacology helped a lot once he backed off on the booze. Little by little Carter found his old self again, but it was difficult keeping up appearances. Tentative plan once the house sold was for Carter to get a small apartment up in Baltimore closer to work and maybe, just maybe, start over at forty-nine.

Jesus, all the stupid maybes....

Maybe if he didn't take the call that night...that was the biggest maybe of all. Caller i.d. said Campbell, D. — not his boss or some jabbering telemarketer combing through the cash-flushed zip codes—it was David Campbell, a neighbor. He asked him over for a few beers, watch some basketball...where was the harm? Carter had little else to do on a Saturday night except look at bad cable and maybe feel sorry for himself enough to cry. So, he grabbed his fleece jacket and trudged on over. Now David was probably dead and soon he would be too.

Carter, he thought miserably, you are such a fucking idiot.

Depp cleared his throat with a couple of crackling coughs. “There’s a bunch of stuff we’re gonna do first, and as for capping you, well, I might want to let Justin and Marty weigh in on that end of the action. Only fair since I called dibs on your boy. Thing is right now they’re kind of busy. Middle of some serious Xbox action, know what I’m sayin’? I mean, have you even seen Tom Clancy’s Rainbow Six 3 for the Xbox? Damn is that shit tight. Even cooler when you spark some gak and pound brews.”

Carter just stared.

This can’t be happening.

“You gonna cry now too, Mr. Big Shot? You and your faggot friend coming all the way down here from snot-town Annapolis to get up in my grill? Well, too fucking bad. Got me about one hundred acres back behind this house. Plenty of space to finish up lots of dirty, little things.”

Depp spat. His snuff juice cracked on the concrete floor and sounded just like a cricket being squashed.

“Did you know that in the state of Maryland you can bury a body on your own property as long as the person dies of natural causes? Swear to God, it’s a fact. My grandparents paid for this land a long time ago and they left it all to me. They’re buried out back. Grandma got cancer and two months after she died my grandpop croaked. Broken heart they said, but hell if I know. I figure we can bury you two assholes right on top of them, maybe scatter some leaves to cover the fresh clay and dirt. They’re both down a good nine feet or more above the aquifer, so hey, I know they won’t mind. You two could be like new neighbors moving in upstairs. Regular party grave.”

“I have children.”

“Yeah, well, boo-hoo...you should have thought of them before. Now then. That garage door over there? That puppy is pinned and locked on the inside and outside so don’t even try because we’ll hear you, got it? And if you make a fuss and start screaming, I’m going to get upset and suggest some really fucked up things to Justin and Marty. Like razors and bleach and shit. Nearest house is more than a mile from here and those people are never there. Face it, bro, you’re done fucked.”

Carter retched and stabilized himself. “Listen to me, I’ve—”

Depp barked, “No, you listen! I’m tired of your shit! Go ahead! Poke around in here if you want. I don’t mind. Everything in this garage is locked down tighter than a crow’s ass, so unless you have a secret knife on you or a gun, which you fuckin’ don’t, I suggest you give yourself a few minutes before we start the show. Contemplate your fate. Make peace with God, the devil, I don’t give a rat’s ass.”

With a sudden burst of speed, Depp bounded up a short wooden stoop out of the garage and into the house. The hollow slam of the cheap door sent shockwaves through the adjacent walls.

Carter’s eyes flicked around the garage. No windows. No side exit. A greasy hose, a couple of empty plastic gasoline jugs hanging on rubberized hooks without their lids. A crappy-looking black lawnmower. Empty crab traps. There was a faded, life-sized cardboard cutout of a liquor model standing in the corner wearing a polka dot bikini.

A cartoon dialogue balloon had been scribbled on the cutout's abdomen leading out of the bikini's bottom. In thick black marker the balloon read:

SURE IS WARM IN HERE!!!

Carter heard muffled hoots from the three men inside. Somebody shouted at somebody to throw him a beer. The scorched ammonia stink of menthol tobacco, burning plastic and weed leaked from the crack beneath the door.

Carter tried to stand, but collapsed as a frayed bolt of agony spidered through his leg. He pulled up the fabric of his jeans and saw a knot of dark wool soaked in blood. His ankle had been hobbled with pipe or something when he was unconscious. Carter didn't remember it at all.

He inched his way over to the roll of carpet and whispered fiercely to see if David was still alive.

"David?! David?!"

He hefted a scratched hand against the bulky roll and gave the backing a hard nudge. The effort knocked Carter off balance. More jagged pain sparkled from the ankle, and he felt himself passing out. Carter forced himself into a sitting position again and tried a second nudge. There was so much blood.

"David?! Can you hear me?"

Oh God...oh God...oh God...

David and Carter drove by the driveway slow.

"There she is..."

From the front passenger seat Carter looked up a small hill through the thick bramble of vine-choked oak and scrub. A crushed oyster-shelled driveway snaked up to a dilapidated brick-faced rambler with a connected garage. A solitary light beamed off the front steps. Carter caught a flash of the jacked-up pickup truck David described earlier and the shadow of a second sagging sedan beside it.

Carter looked at David expectantly. "We're just going to leave the tires at the foot of the driveway, right?"

David drove around a bend a few hundred yards down the road and slowed again. He killed the BMW's headlights and pulled over. David put the car in park and left the engine running. He looked straight ahead into the shapeless pitch of the surrounding woods.

"What we're going to do is leave my car here and then haul the tires through the woods back there. We'll sneak up and leave them right on the doorstep."

Carter forced a laugh. "Oh, come on."

"No, that's the plan, dude. I checked it out this morning. It'll take us maybe ten minutes through those woods on foot, tops."

"I'm not hauling old tires through the woods."

"What are you? A puss?"

Carter frowned. "Those tires weigh a lot, David."

"I thought you used to do triathlons and stuff?"

“I did but I’m almost fifty years old now. I’m not hauling a bunch of old tires through the woods in the middle of the night just to make a point with a bunch of lowlifes.”

“You didn’t say that before.”

“Yeah, well, you didn’t mention going all tango-bravo company on me either.” Carter tried to reason with David. “Look, man, I say we just leave them next to his mailbox at the foot of the drive, bolt back home, and get some sleep. These guys? They’ll get the message.” Carter shucked the sleeve of his fleece and checked his watch. “It’s almost one a.m. anyway. That guy is probably dead asleep. I didn’t see any lights on except that porch light, did you?”

“So you are a puss.”

“I’m not.”

“Puss, puss, puss, puss, puss....”

“Will you just cut it out with the puss stuff? This isn’t high school. We’re not on a frat dare. We go tramping through that brush that guy could hear us. He could call the cops and then where are we? Calvert County jail? Uh, don’t think so. He could be armed, David. In fact I have no doubt in my mind that guy like that has a hunting gun of some kind. Hell, he might even have a dog, did you even think of that? He could have freakin’ Cujo tied up back there.”

David mulled Carter’s strategic assessments over for a moment. He sniffed hard and then unsnapped the buckle on his safety belt. A dashboard bell started pinging.

“A dog, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Stay here.”

Carter reached out. “Wait!”

Before Carter could stop him, David was out of the car and bumping the driver’s side door shut. He took off jogging back toward the house. A few minutes later Carter heard a curt whistle muffled through the vehicle’s dark glass. A minute after that David was back in the car, winded and rubbing his hands together for warmth.

“No pooch.”

“Just because you whistled?”

David turned in his seat to face Carter. His heavy breathing was yeasty and sour in the tight space. “Did you hear that whistle? So you know, I’ve hailed hacks in Manhattan and a whistle like that? Even if a dog was inside that house and deaf as a stone, a dog would go positively bonkers. I didn’t hear squat.”

David dropped the BMW into drive, turned the headlights back on, and swung the car out onto the road again. He accelerated and adjusted his steering.

“Now what? Where are we going now?”

David buckled in, “We’ll drive down the road for ten minutes or so before we turn around and double back. Just in case someone back there did hear something.”

Carter pressed his hands to his face and smeared his eyes. David took notice and lightly backhanded Carter’s bicep to get his attention.

“Hey. Life presents you with opportunities, man.”

“This? This is what you call an opportunity?”

“Yeah. An opportunity.”

“Tell me, just how is this an opportunity.”

David sighed irritably at Carter's lack of vision. "This is a shot at glory is all I'm saying. It's an opportunity to say enough to all the crap that's always raining down on guys like you and me, a chance to say no way, Jose, not this time. You can't pull a stunt like dumping trash in my neighborhood and expect to get away with it, not on my watch. Guys like us, we always roll over for bullshit like this, and it's the little things just like this that add up, chip away at who we really are inside."

Carter shook his head. "Who're you, Norman Mailer? We hitting the sweat lodge with Robert Bly after this?"

David stared at his neighbor like he just passed wind. Went back to driving. "Look, I know you've had it rough these past couple of years with your divorce and losing your kids and all, but hear me out. We all end up where we started from, OK? That's all I'm saying. All of us are on our way to the big zero, six feet down, and for what? For what? Think of it this way. You and me? We're on a great adventure."

Carter was silent for a few moments. He listened to the soft hum of the BMW's engine.

"You know what? I'll take the tires. Drop me off at my house and I will take the stupid tires to the stupid landfill on Monday."

"That's not the point!"

In retrospect, they must've sounded like a pair of elephants trying to sneak up that hill in the dark. Halfway up they were outflanked and knocked cold by three fast moving shadows. At one point before the world drained away, Carter remembered feeling wet leaves against his lower back as he was dragged by his feet through the deadfall. He heard laughter. Blinked up at a clipped fingernail moon.

Three on one. Gimped and nauseous. A probable concussion against three meth-jacked, beer-pounding country boy freakshows. It was impossible.

Carter thought of his children and strained to block out their faces. His fear was so acute he didn't need to be weakened further with thinking about how they'd handle his unresolved disappearance. He had to do something. He figured if he had any chance at all it would depend on who came through the door first. If it was Depp with the shotgun there was chance, albeit slim, that Carter could lunge for one of his bad knees and maybe jerk the stock free with Depp off balance.

Carter tried to recall the specs on a couple of Benellis he handled at a sportsman outlet a few years ago. Would Depp come in with the safety on or off? A good hunter always kept the safety on unless he was ready to shoot, but then he realized he had a much bigger problem.

Other than taking out a knee, how do you disable a three hundred pound maniac?

Tool bench. Maybe there was something in that cardboard box.

Carter gritted and heaved himself up on his good leg. It was an agonizing feat and he ended up balancing on his one good foot like Ralph Macchio in *The Karate Kid*. He told himself to focus. Focus. Get something. Anything. Fast. Something before they came back and mowed him down like a cornered animal.

Two excruciating hops later, Carter braced his weight against the tool bench's edge and wept. Shaking with cold sweat, his numb fingers fumbled for the cardboard

box where Depp grabbed the shells for the Benelli. When Carter looked inside the box he expected to find buckshot shells or slugs shells, but inside were barely eight or nine white-dusted shells, some empty shell casings, and one or two brass heads without primers. In the corner of the box was a small Tupperware tub of rock salt.

He glanced over at the shell press and then at the bundled carpet on the floor of the garage. Nickelback started playing loud inside the house and he nearly screamed.

Rock salt?

What the—?

Carter leaned against the wall by the door; a fistful of rock salt clenched in one hand and a shank made from a deer rib in the other.

The butchered up doe's eyes stared lifelessly at him from the unrolled bolt of orange shag in the center of the garage. The sick fucks. Where was David? It was all some kind of mind game, making Carter think it was David shot dead in the carpet. Carter figured David was probably crumpled in one of the shallow graves out back that Depp described and, to be honest, Carter didn't care anymore. He prayed Depp opened the door first. Depp had those scarred knees. He wanted to pop one and smear the fistful of jagged rock salt into that son of a bitch's eyes when he punctured his throat with the bone he'd twisted free from the doe's carcass.

Nearly seven minutes of standing and shivering and finally Carter felt footsteps beyond the music. The vibrations were heavy and plodding. It had to be Depp. It had to be.

“Yeeehaw! It's party time, boy!”

Depp.

Depp swung the door inward and took the first step out when Carter dove at his knees. The shotgun cracked and Depp fell left, unloading a full bore of rock salt into the side of the garage. The blast shredded the cardboard bikini model and seasoned the walls with a sizzle.

“God damn it!” Depp cried, falling.

Depp hit the floor sideways with a crunch and Carter plunged the deer bone downward. He wanted Depp's throat, but plugged Depp's right eye socket instead.

Depp thrashed and screamed and let go of the gun. Carter snatched the Benelli and rolled over. His ears rang, and at any moment he expected Justin and Marty to come rushing through the doorway. He heard running feet. Shouting.

When Depp's tweaked-out cohorts reached the doorway, both tried to scramble out of the way like dogs changing direction on a frozen pond. Carter fired twice and both crashed backwards into a small mudroom that connected to a galley kitchen.

Carter dragged himself up the steps as Depp shrieked, his stubby fingers fluttering around the bone wedged in his eye. Inside the mudroom, Carter found Justin and Marty writhing on the floor, their hands scooped to their bleeding faces and necks, howling at the unfairness of it all. Adrenaline-charged and oblivious, Carter got to his feet and stumbled right over both of them. In the kitchen's sink he found a cast iron pan full of greasy water and soap scum. He dumped the soap scum down the garbage disposal and then clobbered Justin and Marty's heads until they were still.

Carter dropped the pan and pushed through a set of batwings that led out to derelict living room. David was tied up with duct tape and gagged next to a sooty fireplace full of beer cans. His clothes were muddy and wet with clay and he had been beaten ruthlessly, but he was still alive. They must've had him out back digging the graves. Carter limped over and tore off David's gag with a yank.

"Carter! Oh thank God! What the—?! CARTER! WHAT'RE YOU DOING?! JESUS CHRIST—!"

Carter swung the barrel and rapped David on the top of his head. "Just shut the fuck up, David. Please. For once."

David whimpered as Carter limped back across the living room.

Depp was still freaking out in the garage. Sounded not unlike a squealing pig knowing the exchanging hiss of a butcher's knife on steel. Carter felt around in his jacket pocket for a few more shells. He thumbed three into the Benelli and then unloaded two more rock salt blasts into Justin and Marty's crotches. The two men were still unconscious and hardly twitched at all.

"CARTER! JESUS CHRIST, CARTER, JUST STOP!"

Once again Carter limped back to the living room and the flat look in Carter's eyes made David babble and sob. Carter thought David looked kind of sad. Like a mentally-challenged circus bear who couldn't remember his tricks.

Carter staggered back out to the garage. Depp was on his side now and had pissed himself. Carter fired the third blast point blank into Depp's carotid artery and watched for a minute or so as Depp bled out and seized in cardiac arrest. Carter paused to wipe off the flecks of blood on his face.

He needed slugs. Gun like this, dead doe like that, there had to be slugs in this house somewhere. Yeah. A few more ought to finish everything, he thought. David could bury the bodies. Show him who the real puss was.

Jersey-born writer Kieran Shea has appeared in previous issues of Thuglit and other notable crime fiction venues like Plots With Guns, Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine, and the recently resurrected Crimefactory. His story "Faith-Based Initiative" will appear in the third Thuglit anthology BLOOD, GUTS, AND WHISKEY from Kensington Publishing.