

Excerpt from  
***We Planned a Murder,***  
by Derek D. Wheelless

I lifted my aching body off the floor and staggered out, squinting into the bright light. My assailant was nowhere to be found.

I was still trying to make sense of what my attacker had just said and wondering how long it would take for old Mrs. Hazelton to realize the alarm was screeching from the back door, when my phone rang.

“Nacho,” I answered.

“Mr. Blanco,” the voice on the other end was low, even, deliberate. “I see you’ve met my associate, Mr. Darwood.”

“If you mean the goon who assaulted me, I should have let him rot in the can all night.”

“That’s no way to talk about your future partner,” he said.

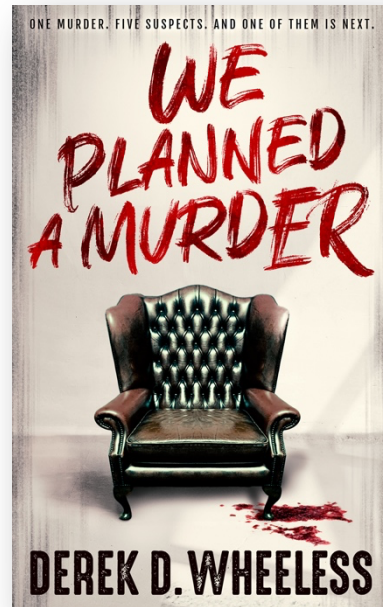
I hobbled down the back steps to the parking lot, grimacing with each move. Somebody had to be in a car watching me.

“We will make money, my little PSI,” the caller continued, “if you do as I say.”

“I don’t do business with assholes.” There were only three cars in the lot. A Camaro, an F-150, and a Subaru. I was pretty sure none of them belonged to old Mrs. Hazelton, but they were all empty, too. “What happened to your little bootlicker? He and I have some unfinished business.”

“Mr. Blanco,” he said, “you’re sore now. It’s understandable. By morning those feelings will have passed, though I suspect the pain in your side will be more obvious than it is now. Not to worry. It happens to the best of us.”

I began my walk toward home again. “If this is all you’ve got, the conversation is over.”



“Hear me out, Mr. Blanco. I’m trying to protect you. We wouldn’t want you to come to the same fate as one very nice—albeit slightly incompetent, and extremely carnal—psychiatrist, Doctor Lincoln Hardcastle.”

“Hardcastle?” I flashed back to the picture hanging on Dream’s office wall. “What are you talking about?”

“My name is Finch,” he said. “In short, you’ll come to call me boss.”

“There are a few other things I’d rather call you,” I said.

“I can get you out of this shitty little town once you graduate, take you to the next level, make you a very successful and very lucrative professional private investigator.”

I raised my eyebrows and my head. “Why don’t you start by unloading what you know about Hardcastle. Who was he?”

“He was a psychiatrist, and you’ve already met one of his patients,” he said. “She even showed you a blade, didn’t she?”

I felt a pain in my jaw and reminded myself that grinding my teeth was bad. “What do you know about her? Stay away from Zadie.”

“Trust me, Mr. Blanco, it’s not Zadie I’m worried about. It’s you. I need to meet with you soon. It’s a matter of life or death.”

“Not gonna happen,” I said.

“I was hoping Mr. Darwood had misjudged you, but you’re as predictable as he warned.”

“What do you do, and why’d you have this Darwood guy tail me?”

A notification flashed across my screen.

“I just sent you an article from the *Austin American-Statesman*,” Finch advised me. “It’s dated Sunday, August sixteenth, the day after Hardcastle died. In it you’ll learn they found the dear doctor sprawled out in a chair in his office with cuts on his wrists. It looked like a suicide. The police thought it a homicide. The coroner didn’t have the balls to call it either way. The truth is it was a good ol’ fashioned murder.”