

Blood Money

By Michael Danese
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“Listen here, *David*, you either get those accounts in order or it’ll be your ass on the line if the audit isn’t perfect! Mildred said as she slammed down the phone. She took a slug of her cold coffee as her face twisted into a look of disgust.

Mildred Shepherd is trying her best to manage her architectural consulting firm. All of her competition in the city are firms run by men. She learned early on that she needed to be tough and never show any sign of weakness. The pandemic had caused her to reduce her staff to the bare minimum, which added to her stress level.

She is in her late forties, and the years of long days, late nights in the office, and hard business decisions are reflected in her face. Most people think she is closer to sixty. She has short brown hair and was wearing a tan suit and brown heels. She tried her best to keep in shape with occasional trips to the gym and regular maintenance on her hair and nails, but lately, the challenges of the business are getting to her more and more. The social invitations have dried up and she, unfortunately, developed into a bitter, vindictive woman.

To make matters worse, a colleague let it slip that she saw her husband, Roger, at a bar getting cozy with an attractive young woman. That made her blood boil. She would never admit it, but with the long hours and business commitments, she really hadn’t paid much attention to him lately. She convinced herself that he was always busy at his law firm anyway. Of course, she had her suspicions, saw some of the usual tell-tale signs, but fooled herself into thinking that he could never do that to a woman like her. However, the fact that someone saw him makes it a personal attack on her, and she couldn’t stand for that. The more she thought about it the more it made her blood boil. She sat alone in her office and drove herself into a rage.

She looked up as she heard a knock at her office door. It opened and a young man entered. Aaron West, an account executive, was in his early thirties and was wearing a blue suit. “Sorry to bother you, but I’m sorry to tell you that Peter Nichols just called and canceled their project.”

“What? Did he say why?” she asked. “Don’t we have a signed contract?”

“He said something about the costs of materials being too high. And, no, they were supposed to sign this week,” he said.

“Christ, that’s the third cancellation in two months. You guys better get your act together or we won’t need all of you!” she said.

“Yes, we’ll try harder,” said Aaron, as he headed for the door and closed it behind him.

In the hall, he came face-to-face with George Martino. George was a large man, about six foot two, and at least 250 pounds. He was once a muscular man, but those days are in the rearview. He is now in his mid-fifties, with longish gray hair. He was wearing a white shirt with a blue sport coat and no tie. George was a former police detective with over 30 years on the job before he was forced to “resign” as part of a corruption sweep in the city.

“Good luck, George, she’s fit to be tied,” said Aaron.

“Yeah, she usually is, at least lately,” said George.

George knocked, then entered.

“This better be *good* news,” said Mildred.

“Maybe ... I saw the security video of the vandalism at the Lennon site,” said George.

“Great, send it to the police right away.”

“I recognized a few of the people from the gentrification demonstrations earlier in the week.”

“Good, it will make it easier to arrest them.”

“Do you really think that’s a good idea? It will just stir up more demonstrations, and Black Lives Matter will get involved. The people here feel like they are being forced out of the neighborhood where they grew up and they’re just frustrated.”

“These people just have to learn that they can’t stop progress!” said Mildred.

“*These people?*”

“You know what I mean!”

“I guess I do,” said George.

“It’s a job for the police. They can’t attack me, I mean us, and get away with it!” said Mildred.

“Also, George, I have something I need you to do,” she said.

“Okay ...” said George.

“I have reason to believe that my husband is having an affair, and I would like you to look into it,” said Mildred.

“That’s not really my job ...” he began to say.

“You’re my chief of security, and I see this as a security issue! Plus, I’ll pay you a thousand dollars under the table for your discretion,” she said.

He reluctantly agreed, as if he had a choice. He began to follow her husband, Roger, in the evenings. The first night George waited outside of the house parked in a safe vantage point. The aroma of the pounding rain distracted him and made his mind wander. He thought to himself, “I’m glad it’s raining. It’s the only way to clean the trash, blood, and piss off of this city.”

Several minutes later he saw the garage door open. A red Ferrari backed out. George thought to himself that Roger was making this easy with that flashy car. He followed as Roger drove downtown and pulled into the valet area of an exclusive restaurant. He tossed the keys to a valet, and the young man nodded. He obviously knew Roger.

George parked on the street and went in and took a stool at the bar. From his seat, he saw Roger join a group at a table by the window. There were two men and a woman, all dressed to impress each other. Roger shook everyone’s hands and took a seat.

George ordered a gin and tonic. “Fourteen dollars,” said the pretty young bartender. George thought that he could buy the entire bottle for that price. He handed her a twenty and nodded to her to keep the change. He nursed his drink, and when he was sure that this was a business meeting, he left the bar and returned to his car.

About an hour and a half later, he saw the valet pull the Ferrari to the front of the restaurant. Roger came out, alone, and got behind the wheel. George followed him home, and as the garage door closed, George decided that his night was over.

The next night George repeated the process. As he waited, the rain continued. George thought that the streetlights and the wet streets looked like a scene from any number of TV cop shows. Soon the Ferrari emerged and this time the car headed to the university area and pulled up to a luxury townhouse. A minute later a woman came out of the front door. She was a tall redhead wearing a too-short black dress and very high heels. She was probably in her late twenties. Roger jumped out, held an umbrella over her, then opened the car door for her. She gave him a hug and a quick kiss before getting in. George took photos of the exchange.

He followed them to a small boutique restaurant on the edge of the city. They nuzzled into a corner table and certainly appeared to be enjoying themselves. George found a seat at the bar with his back to them. Roger was only a few feet behind him, so they were almost back-to-back.

“Great news!” said Roger. “I have a case in Las Vegas next week, so we’ll be able to spend a few days there.”

“That sounds *fun*. The last time was wonderful, and hopefully it won’t be as hot,” she said.

“Hopefully, but if you’ll be there, I *know* it will be hot!” he said, almost leering.

“I hate to bring it up yet again, but I’m getting *tired* of sneaking around! I want you to meet my friends, and my family,” she said as she reached across the table and squeezed his hand.

“I know, Angela, I know. It won’t be much longer, I promise,” he said, faking sincerity.

“You’re my everything,” she said.

George had a drink at the bar and discreetly took a few more photos. He paid his tab, texted his boss, and left. He met Mildred back at her office.

He entered the office and found her behind her desk, as usual. “Well?” she asked.

“You were right,” he said as he showed her a few photos on his phone.

Mildred erupted like George had never seen before, and he’d seen her pissed many times. “That bastard! How could he! I gave him everything and asked for nothing in return, except for a little loyalty! He can’t treat me like this! I won’t stand for it!”

She put her palms flat on the table and leaned in towards him. “I want you to kill him, I need him gone, make him go away for me, George.”

Now it was George’s turn to erupt, “Absolutely not! That *isn’t* who I am, it’s *not* what I do!”

“George, it’s either you or someone else. And if it isn’t you, just pack up your office now and clear out. But, if you do this for me, I’ll give you ten thousand dollars now, and ten thousand more when the job is done.” She stood up and began to open the safe on the wall behind her desk.

George thought about how insulted he felt that she even asked. He knew that she was an unscrupulous woman who was used to getting her way. He thought about how much he hated working for her, but since he lost his detective job, he would be hard-pressed to find something else that paid so well. She turned back around and handed him a large stack of cash. He took it without saying a word, stood up, turned around and headed toward the door.

“Text me when it is done and I’ll give you the rest,” she said as he closed the door behind him.

The next night George again followed Roger.

He again headed downtown and stopped at a florist. A few minutes later he came out with a large bouquet of red roses, trimmed with baby’s breath, and it was all held together with a large red bow. From there he drove to the brownstone. George thought to himself that Roger must have some special news or plans. Roger parked on the street and walked to the door carrying the bouquet. Angela opened the door and was thrilled to see the flowers. She hugged and kissed him and pulled him into the house by his free arm.

George parked down the street with a perfect view of the door. He sat in his car for almost two hours. he thought to himself that he was glad that it was now dark. As he looked through his windshield with the raindrops dripping down, he thought that the way that the streetlights and taillights were reflected and refracted in front of him that it looked like an impressionistic painting. Then he looked at his reflection in the rearview mirror. The drops were projected onto his face by the streetlights and looked like tears dripping down his cheeks. This brought him back to reality as he thought about how terrible he felt about what he was about to do.

Roger finally made his exit. George got out of his car and began walking. He pulled his raincoat around him and tugged his hat down low over his face. He caught up behind Roger as he was getting ready to get into his car. “Don’t turn around, I’ve got a gun on you. Get in,” said George as he opened the passenger side door and got into the car.

“What *is* this? Do I know you?” Roger asked with a crack in his voice as he saw the gun pointed at him.

“No, you don’t know me. The truth is, your wife hired me to kill you because she knows about the affair with Angela,” George deadpanned.

“What? How’d *she* find out?” asked Roger.

“I told her. I’ve been following you and documenting your movements. You’ve been a *bad* boy, Roger!” joked George.

“That hateful bitch! You can’t imagine what it is like being married to her!” squirmed Roger.

“I don’t care,” said George.

“I’m like her pet on a leash!” said Roger.

“I don’t care.”

“Please, I don’t deserve this!” Roger pleaded.

“*Sure* you do, I saw Angela. Are you saying that I’m mistaken? I’m a liar?” asked George.

“No, no. Angela is my saving grace. Please, can’t we work something out? And, please, no matter what you do to me, please don’t hurt her!” pleaded Roger. “Whatever she’s paying you I’ll pay *double!*”

George wasn’t expecting this at all. He kinda liked Roger, and certainly couldn’t blame him. Besides, Angela seems like a lot more fun than Mildred. He never really relished the idea of killing anyone anyway.

“Please!” begged Roger. “I can pay you!”

“So, you’ll pay me a hundred K?” asked George.

“A hundred thousand dollars! Wow, she *really* must want me gone! Yes, yes, I’ll pay it! Please, let me go to my office. I have a safe there. I’ll give you the cash!” said Roger.

“Fair enough. The truth is, I hate her too. Here’s the plan,” said George, thinking out loud. “After you pay me, I’ll text her and let her know the job is done. I’ll tell her I want my money right away. When I’m close to meeting with her, I’ll call you and put my phone on mute so you can hear our conversation. *Record* it. You could probably use it to get out of your sorry excuse for a marriage and get a nice settlement,” instructed George.

The two men headed to Roger’s office. George kept the gun on him to let him know that he meant business. When they arrived and got out of the car, George pocketed the gun, but still, he kept it aimed. He pulled his hat down over his face again to hide from the security cameras. They walked through the empty office building until they arrived at Roger’s office.

Roger quickly went to the safe behind his desk, twirled the tumblers and the door swung open. He counted out a hundred thousand dollars and handed it to George. George pulled his hat down again as they left the office. Roger was whimpering and was on the verge of being sick throughout the whole ordeal. They returned to the Ferrari so Roger could drop George back at his car.

When George was in his car, he texted Mildred to let her know the job was done. He said to meet him at her office now to collect the rest of his money. While he made the short drive, he pieced together his plan. He thought, ‘This will be okay. With a hundred and twenty thousand dollars in cash, plus my savings and my pension, I should be just fine. I’ll call my cousin Vince tomorrow and tell him to put the house up for sale. With today’s strong real estate market, and the fact that I’m selling it furnished, it should sell fast. After I get the money from her, I’ll head home and pack everything that I want from the house in my trailer. I’ll get on the road for Marathon Key. I’ll stay at that little motel near the docks. I’ll put all of the stuff from the trailer in storage until I can find a small cottage to buy. Then a boat. Maybe I’ll do charters. Roger must be smart if he’s a lawyer. He’ll be able to use the knowledge that she planned to kill him to get the divorce he wants. If he needs proof, he will always have the recording to dangle in front of her. She’ll never come after me because she knows that I know enough to put her away. Yes, this will work out just fine.’ He smiled.

George made sure he was at the office before Mildred arrived. When he saw her heading for the door, he called Roger. “Start recording,” he said as he put his phone on mute. Roger began recording.

Again, he wrapped himself in his raincoat and had his hat pulled down. When George saw Mildred enter the building, he went in right behind her as she was unlocking the door. He followed her to her office. She entered and sat behind her desk without saying a word. George closed the office door and then he sat across from her.

“He’s dead?” asked Mildred.

“Yes.”

“Did you shoot him?”

“Yes.”

“Where’s the gun?”

“Right here,” said George as he patted his pocket.

“Where’s the body? Did you get the little slut too?” she asked.

“No more questions. The less you know the better,” said George.

“Right. Smart.”

“Now give me my money.”

Mildred stood, turned around, and went to the safe behind her desk.

“His and hers safes,” George chuckled to himself.

After a few seconds, the safe door swung open, and Mildred reached in. She quickly pulled out a gun and pointed it at George as he stood up. “Put your hands up or I’ll shoot you right in the head!” she demanded.

George, a bit dumbstruck, put his hands above his head. “Lying bitch,” he muttered.

Mildred picked up her phone and dialed 911 with her left hand.

“Hello ... hello, yes, it’s an emergency!” she said through fake terror and tears. “This is Mildred Shepherd at Shepherd Consulting at 1805 Chestnut Street. A disgruntled employee just burst into my office while I was working late! ... Please hurry, he told me he murdered my husband and now he’s demanding cash! ... No, I had a gun in my safe and I have it pointed at him. My office door is open. *Please help me!*”

While still on the phone Mildred shot George twice in the chest. He fell to the floor in front of the desk, gasping.

“Yes, He just pointed his gun at *me*, so I *had* to shoot him. Oh, my God! What have I done! Please *hurry!*” Mildred said while walking around the desk and hanging up the phone.

With his last effort, George raised his gun and shot her in the head right after she hung up. A surprised Mildred collapsed on the floor right next to George and they bled out together.

Roger, still listening on the phone, was horrified. He stopped the recording and ran out, jumped into his car, and sped to his wife’s office. He arrived there right behind an army of police cars. The street was ablaze with a spectacle of flashing lights.

“Please, please, let me in, this is my wife’s company!” Roger pleaded. He pushed his way in and saw the bloody bodies on the floor. He began to gag and just made it to the restroom before his guts erupted. He splashed some water on his face and took a second to try to compose himself. As he exited the restroom, he came face to face with a detective.

“So, you are Ms. Shepherd’s husband? I’m the detective in charge, Lieutenant Dodson,” he said with a surprised tone. “We heard you were murdered.”

“I know, I can explain. Is she...?” asked Roger.

“She didn’t make it,” Dodson said to Roger. Then he turned to another officer, “Take him into custody.”

They brought Roger to the station and put him into a holding cell. He sat there for what seemed like an eternity while the police finished at the crime scene. Finally, Dodson came into the room

and asked him to tell what he knew. Roger explained the whole story, his affair, the payoff, and what he heard on the phone. Then he asked for his phone and played the recording.

Dodson and the other officers were disgusted by the whole thing, eventually they determined that Roger didn't commit a crime, they thought he was more like another victim. He was soon released.

When everything was finally sorted, the cash was all returned to Roger. He was also aware that, as her beneficiary, he was set up to inherit ownership of her company and her other assets down the road after her estate was settled.

The problem was that he was also a changed man. He had terrifying nightmares and couldn't sleep. He tossed and turned, thinking about what would have happened if Mildred would have hired a different hit man.

He finally had all that he wanted, Angela, freedom from his wife, and millions of dollars. Unfortunately, the near-death experience and the knowledge that he indirectly caused two deaths was simply too much for him.

He tried to self-medicate with alcohol and sleeping pills, thinking that if he could just sleep, he would be alright. His colleagues at the firm noticed the change in him and suggested that he take some time off, mainly because they noticed that his work was also suffering, and that affected *their* bottom line.

He spent several days in his pajamas, shaving and showering became occasional, then rare events. Eventually Angela, despite all of his money, grew tired of his poor hygiene, constant self-pity, and dreariness. He took losing her very hard. He spiraled darkly and deeply, fueled by his survivor's guilt and the severe Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome.

Several weeks later he was speeding down the expressway. He was on the phone pleading with Angela to take him back. Again. She hung up on him. Again. He hit the gas and was passing cars like he made the jump to lightspeed. He heard a siren and saw the tell-tale blaring police lights in his rear-view mirror. Those lights flashed him right back to that fateful night. He pushed the car until it red-lined. A few seconds later his Ferrari decapitated a tree. The airbag was the last thing that Roger saw. There were no skid marks.

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