

Side Hustle
By Michael Danese
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The doorbell rang and John rushed to open it. “You must be Aurora, please come in! Wow, I was afraid that you wouldn’t look anything like your picture, but you look even better!”

Aurora entered with a little giggle. He wasn’t kidding. She was dazzling. She was tall and slender, with long red hair, a few freckles and blazing red lipstick. She slowly dropped her coat along her short skirt, bare legs, then down around her high heels, to reveal a barely-there black dress and all the French perfume you would care to smell. “It’s nice to meet you, John. What a lovely room! I assume we have it *all night*?”

John was in his late forties with thinning gray hair. He was a paunchy guy wearing a blue sports jacket, white shirt, and a blue tie.

“Yes, we do. Can I take your coat?” he said.

She leaned way down to pick up her coat as John enjoyed the view. She handed it to him and walked towards the small table. “Champagne, my favorite!” she said.

John rushed over and nervously poured two glasses. He handed one to Aurora and they clinked.

“To fun!” she said.

She sensed his anxiety and said, “Relax, big fella! Tonight is all about *you*!”

She took his glass and put it on the table. She hugged him and kissed his cheek.

“Thanks, yes, I’m a little nervous, I’ve never…”

“Shh,” she said as she placed a well-manicured finger over his lips. “Why don’t you loosen that tie and make yourself more comfortable? I’m going to go into the bathroom and freshen up a bit.”

She emerged a few minutes later wearing a hint of a negligee and still wearing her heels. He was sitting on the bed wearing his boxers, a white tee shirt and socks.

“That’s a bit more comfortable than I expected,” she said with a laugh.

“I..I’m sorry,” he said trying to cover himself up with a pillow.

“You’re fine. *Relax*, remember, this is all about *you*,” she said with a big smile that revealed dimples deep enough to park a Buick.

He took a deep breath.

“Are you ready for some *fun*?” she asked.

“Um, yes!” he said.

“Do you trust me?” she asked while she wrinkled her nose.

“I...I guess so, sure,” he said.

“Great, I want you to follow my instructions. You’re gonna *love* this. Lay back on the bed and reach for the corners with you hands and feet,” she said.

He reluctantly complied. She then took out four pairs of handcuffs.

“Wait, I’m not comfortable with that!” he exclaimed.

She unbuttoned the top button of her negligee, “Come on, don’t ruin the *fun!*”

She slowly cuffed his hands and feet to the bed. Then she took out her phone and made a quick text. A few seconds later, there was a knock at the door.

“Who’s that? Please send them away!” pleaded John.

Aurora opened the door and a man with a ski mask entered. He immediately began taking pictures as John went wild on the bed. Aurora climbed on top of him and hugged him as she posed for the photos.

After several seconds, the man stopped.

“I’m so sorry John,” she said as she removed his wallet from his pants that were in a heap on the floor. The man handed her a sharpie. “This is how this will work best for you,” she said while thumbing through the wallet. She removed his ATM card, an American Express card, a Visa, and a Mastercard. “You’re going to give me the PIN numbers for these cards, and we will destroy the photos and have someone unlock you soon. Look, I’m putting the key to the handcuffs on this table. Or, if you refuse, the photos will be sent to your wife, your office and Instagram.”

“Please, don’t do this, you will *ruin* me, please!” John begged.

“Nah, you’ll survive, you’ll just lose some money. The cards will cover your loss, if you report it,” she said. “Now, if you refuse, yeah, you’ll be ruined,” she said, wrinkling her nose again and smiling.

“Okay, okay, the cards all have the same number, it’s 1978,” he said with a whisper.

“Your birthday year! Not very secure, my friend,” she said. “And, if you’re lying, and this number doesn’t work, you’ll be ruined, and no one will come to unlock you until the maid turns up tomorrow.”

“The number will work,” he muttered.

She gathered her belongings and slipped into her coat. “Thanks for a lovely evening John. I told you it would be memorable!”

The couple hugged in the hallway and walked towards the elevator. He removed his ski mask. She began to remove her wig.

“No, leave it on. ATMs have cameras. You need to maintain the look for a few hours yet. We will hit a few different ones, then after midnight we will do it again because these cards have daily limits. And don’t forget to wear those big dark sunglasses at the ATMs” he said.

“Right, I forgot. Then after we hit the last ATM I’ll call the hotel and say I heard something strange coming from the hotel room and they will rescue that loser,” she said.

“How was it for you? You seem pretty proud of yourself,” he asked.

“Honestly, it was exhilarating! I felt like a quarterback in the Super Bowl! For a first effort I don’t think I could have asked for more,” she said.

“I figured as much. I will admit, it *was* a rush!” said Riggy.

Now, gentle reader, before this continues, let’s rewind a few months to see how this plan came together.

The nectar of spring flowers filled the air as Riggy walked through the manicured grass on the quad. He is a tall, muscular guy, a former high school running back, but not quite good enough to make the jump to college. He is a bit Brad Pitt-ish, at least that is what the girls said. He’s wearing a State tee shirt and blue shorts. He entered the union building and sank into one of the huge leather sofas.

As he was reading a textbook, he was distracted by a whiff of French fries coming from the snack bar. He glanced in that direction and saw a girl buying some. He recognized her from a class. She was a natural beauty, tall and thin with shoulder length blond hair. She reminded him of Grace Kelly, with bigger dimples and a better body. She was wearing a tank top, shorts and sneakers.

He decided to try his luck. He walked over and stood behind her so when she turned around she would be facing him. When she did, they were face to face. “Oh, hi, hey, aren’t you in my philosophy class?”

“Are you sure, that’s a huge class,” she said.

“Believe me, in *all* of your classes, every guy in the class knows you’re in it, and lotsa girls too,” he said, flashing that smile.

“Get out of here!” she replied.

“No, really, I remember seeing you in class thinking that when God was creating Eve, he envisioned a face so beautiful that Adam could never resist. And the face he saw was yours,” he said.

“Ha! Does that line actually work for you?” she said with a laugh.

“Well, it’s a work in progress,” he said.

“It needs more work,” she said, returning his smile, “a lot more!”

“Yeah, I know, pretty lame. Riggy,” he said, extending his hand.

“Hi, I’m Alisha. Riggy?”

“Yeah, actually it’s Rocco, but when I was little the kids called me Riggy and it sorta stuck.”

“I kinda like it,” she said tilting her head and giving a sly smile. “Let me guess, finance major?”

“No, poli-sci, then law school, a least that’s the plan,” said Riggy. “You?”

“Pre-med.”

“Our parents would be so proud we met,” said Riggy.

“Well, *yours* would,” said Alisha with a laugh. “Wanna share my fries?”

“Finally! That’s why I came over, ya know.”

They made their way back to a couch and slowly ate fries and talked for a while. Eventually they turned their attention to some of the others in the area.

“What about her?” he asked.

“She definitely has at least seven cats, and she can discuss the personality traits of each for hours,” she said. “Him?”

“Oh, that guy will struggle to use his history degree, and within a year he’ll be selling used cars,” he said. “Them?”

“Next month she’ll tell him she’s pregnant, crushing his dreams of a minor league baseball contract,” she said.

Their sarcastic wit was just the tip of their compatibility. They became close friends over the next few months and were inseparable. They even spoke of being soulmates. Over breakfast one morning they began to think about the end of the semester.

“What are you thinking for the summer? Summer session? Travel?” asked Riggy.

“All of those things cost money, which I don’t have. I’ll need to get a job someplace. Maybe at that Prime Cut place that spins at the top of the Marriott. I know a bartender there. My loans are killing me. I’m going to need some cash. I may need to take a year off,” she said.

“Yeah, I hear ya, I’m in the same boat. I was thinking of a construction job. That’s what I did last summer” he said. “Ha, check out this story, I read about it online,” he said as he turned up the TV.

Unfortunately, the story just ended so Riggy summarized, “Apparently a prominent businessman hired an escort. When they were in a hotel room, she tied him up and robbed him. A maid called the police and from there the story went viral. It ruined the guy.”

“Serves him right!” said Alisha. “Hmmm ...”

“What?” he said.

“No, I was thinking ... hypothetically, if it was done right, and you carefully planned it out, you could make some serious money with that scheme,” said Alisha.

“Yeah, except for the crime factor,” said Riggy.

“Well, no one needs to get hurt. It’s all in the planning,” she said.

“So, you’ll work as an escort? Your mom would be so proud!”

“No, of course not,” she said, then continued, almost thinking out loud, “We’ll use Tinder. We’ll create a profile for me where it states I’m looking for *fun* only. I’ll say I’m looking for mature guys, older than forty. I’ll require meeting in an expensive hotel room with a bottle of champagne on ice. I’ll get a long red wig, green contacts, add some freckles and red lipstick, stilettos and some vampy clothes. You can take a few sexy photos and we’ll be in business! We’ll be able to pick and choose who we respond to,” she said.

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” he said.

“You always said you were up for an adventure this summer, and an adventure means *risk*,” she said.

“I didn’t include *jail* in that risk,” he said.

“Consider the risk/reward ratio, and we could pay down some serious debt,” she said.

“I can see you’re already leaning into this. Let’s work on the plan, try to think of every variable and see where it takes us,” he said.

So that’s how we got to where we are now. After their successful adventure in the hotel room with John they made a few thousand dollars. As you might expect, Aurora’s Tinder was blown up with guys looking to have *fun*. They waded through the swipers to identify their next targets. For the three months they played out their fantasy suite scenario a few nights a week and amassed quite a pile of cash.

In the last few weeks, Riggy grew weary of this. He was tired of these guys pawing his girlfriend, and to him, the risk was outweighing the reward. They argued about it, and soon Alisha gave in. They decided that tonight would be Aurora’s swan song. And why not? They had a good run and made more money than they ever imagined.

Robert was the victim de jour. Aurora entered the hotel room and Robert behaved according to the script. After she had Robert spread-eagle on the bed, she texted Riggy and he entered wearing the ski mask.

“Listen, you seem like nice kids. Please let me assure you that you’re making a *huge* mistake. I promise this won’t end well for you,” said Robert.

“We’ll see about that,” said Aurora. “Now, give us the PINs for these cards and we’ll be on our way. You’ll be free soon enough.”

“You’ll regret this!” said Robert. Then he started coughing violently. “Drink, drink!” he managed to say as he pointed to his glass near Riggy.

Riggy took the glass and held it to Robert’s lips so he could take a few sips. He quickly returned the glass to the table. “Come on, let’s get outta here.”

As soon as they were clear, Riggy said, “I don’t have a good feeling about tonight. That’s the last time for sure.”

“Yes, you’re right, it really isn’t much fun anymore,” said Alisha.

After they made the call to the hotel, Robert gained his freedom. He thanked the staff, then begged for their discretion. The night manager assured him that discretion was part of their brand. As soon as they left, Robert grabbed the glasses and put them into small bags. He then went around the room and removed three cameras that he had hidden.

The next day he reviewed his footage at home. He noted a small butterfly tattoo on Aurora’s ankle, and a hint of a part of a scar on Riggy’s forearm. He then dusted the glasses for their fingerprints. Robert wasn’t kidding when he warned them. As a private detective, he can easily track people down. He printed some still frames from the video and uploaded the fingerprints.

Why the cameras, you may be wondering? It seems that Robert also had a seedy side-hustle going. When the PI business got slow, he occasionally lured beautiful women to hotel rooms and had sex in view of his hidden cameras. He would then edit the footage and blur out the faces. Then he would sell the finished videos to porn sites for a hefty fee. This time, he was able to edit the footage into an indictment of guilt for the young couple.

When he got the fingerprint results back, he found that he got a hit on Riggy’s from a juvenile record. “Hello Mr. Rocco Foglia,” he said. He was quickly able to track down Riggy’s address.

Robert staked out Riggy’s apartment for several days. He eventually deduced that the tall blond was Aurora. Then he saw Riggy drive up and park and unload groceries from his car. He knew Aurora was already at home. He walked up behind Riggy and when he got close, he said, “Hey Rocco!”

Riggy quickly turned around and all he saw was the gun. “Keep walking inside. We’ll talk there,” Robert said in a whisper.

As soon as they were inside, Alisha said from the other room, “You can just put those things on the table. I’ll be right out to help to put them away.”

Robert gestured with the gun.

“I ... I need you to come out right now,” said Riggy.

“What’s up?” Alisha said as she entered the room. Then she saw the gun, then Robert. “Who are you?”

“I’m the guy you soaked for three grand,” Robert replied. “First, you go and get my cash, *now!* And you, sit on that couch.”

Alisha shot a glance at Riggy. “Please get him his money,” Riggy whimpered.

A few seconds later Alisha emerged from the bedroom with a wad of cash. “It’s all there, you can count it. Please mister, we don’t want any trouble,” pleaded Alisha.

“Oh, it’s *much* too late for that. Where are my credit cards?” said Robert.

“Shredded,” said Riggy.

“Figgered that. Okay. Sit next to Rocco, Aurora, or whatever your name is. Do you remember my warnings? I told you not to do it, that you would be sorry, and now I’m going to prove myself right,” said Robert. He took his phone from his pocket, and started a video, then he handed the phone to Alisha. They watched in horror as the entire incident in the hotel played out. He also handed them a few stills showing the tattoo and the scar. “I also have your fingerprints from the glasses. I’ve got you, dead to rights.”

“So ... now what?” asked Alisha.

“I guess I could call the police and you can come clean, then you can rot in jail,” said Robert.

“Yeah, I don’t think that’s gonna happen. You wouldn’t be here with a gun and all this cloak and dagger stuff,” said Riggy.

“Righto, college boy! You’re going to do your little dog and pony show one last time, for me. And in return I’ll destroy the video. Or, I’ll upload it to social media along with your names and also send it to the police. I still have some contacts there. They love when a case comes in all wrapped with a bow,” said Robert.

“Oh, so you’re an ex-cop,” said Riggy. “That explains a lot.”

“Ex-*detective*, to be exact, but enough about me. Let me explain how this next chapter will play out. There’s this police commissioner, August West, that always had it in for me. He blackmailed me into resigning. You’re gonna put on your little whore costume and get him to take you to a hotel. After you have him handcuffed, you’ll text me and I’ll come in. We’ll take a few of those photos that you love, Then you can get outta my sight forever. I’ll destroy the video file,” said Robert.

“What are you going to do then?” asked Alisha.

“Not that it matters to you, but I’m going to *negotiate* my job back! If he doesn’t agree, you’ll be famous when I post the photos and ruin him. So, pray it doesn’t come to that,” said Robert.

“I ... I won’t do it! Can’t do it!” said Alisha.

“Okay, your choice,” said Robert as he took the phone back and started to push a few buttons. “I’ll just post this video to Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. I’ll tag you both, along with the

university. And, for good measure, I'll also post the photos. What a shame, and so close to fulfilling your dreams!"

"Wait!" said Riggy. "Give us a second."

"Us? You're not the one blackmailing the police commissioner!" said Alisha.

"True, but I'll also be ruined if this doesn't happen," said Riggy.

After a few minutes of heated discussion, Alisha agreed.

"Excellent! It will happen tonight. He spends most nights at McSorley's Pub. I know he has a thing for tall redheads, so you're a cinch. I'll be keeping a close eye. When you have him all locked down, text me at this number and I'll be at the door," said Robert with a wicked tone. He handed her a piece of paper with the number and a photo. "Here's a recent picture of him, just so there's no mistake."

"What should I say to him?" she asked.

"Easy," said Robert, "ask him if he's famous, say you saw him on TV or in the papers, he'll eat that up. Okay, I'm done here. Remember, if it doesn't go down as I said, or if you don't show up, a posting I will go."

That night, at about 9:30, Aurora strolled into McSorley's. Every head turned to watch. Riggy was in the far corner. Robert was in another corner. She spotted Commissioner West at the bar and sat a few stools away. West was a grizzly looking man in his mid-fifties, almost bald and overweight. He had on an unbuttoned white dress shirt and a gray sports jacket. He turned towards her and looked her over. When his eyes finally reached her face, she smiled.

A man in a natty three-piece suit descended on Alisha. "Hey, how about a drink?"

"I'd love one! I'm just waiting for my father to come out of the bathroom. You, know, prostate problems. He would love a drink too!" said Alisha. The guy got the message and withdrew.

West watched the scene play out and let out an audible chuckle. Alisha saw her opening. "Hey, I'm sorry, but I'm sure I know you! Aren't you famous, like on TV or in movies?" she said while batting her big green eyes.

"Well, I don't know about famous, but I've been on TV a few times when we had big cases," said West, all proud of himself.

"Wow, I'll bet you have great stories!" she said as she moved over one stool to be next to him.

"I have stories that will curl your toes," said West.

"I'm Aurora," she said, extending her hand.

"August," he said as he shook her tiny hand. "Now, about that drink...?"

She tilted her head and gave her trademarked wrinkled smile. *Game. Set. Match.*

Before long they were in a hotel room. He was feeling great with himself. Alisha, not so much.

“Listen, I’m sorry, I just can’t do this,” she said.

“I won’t hurt you, I promise,” he said as he took off his jacket.

“No, it isn’t that. I mean, I *really can’t* do this. I have a confession to make. I’m here because someone is forcing me to. To blackmail you,” she said in a low voice.

“What? Who? Why?” West said angrily.

“He’s a former detective. Robert. He said you blackmailed him into resigning, and he wants his job back,” she said.

“Ha! Porno Bob? *He’s* behind this? Let me guess, he lured you into bed and took some dirty pictures, right?” asked West.

“Yes, well, something like that. I’m scared, August. He said he’ll ruin my life if I don’t do what he says,” she said.

“This will do it for him. He was accused of this before, with ties to the porno industry. We couldn’t prove anything, so I gave him the opportunity to keep his dignity and resign. I actually did him a *favor*! So, what does he want you to do? What’s the plan?”

“I’m to get you into bed and handcuff your hands and feet, then call him. He’ll come in and make me pose with you in photos. Then I guess he will use the photos to get his job back. I’m so sorry...”

“My dear! This isn’t *your* fault! You did the right thing coming clean. I’ll make sure nothing happens to you,” said West. “Now, go ahead and make that call.” He then took his Glock from his holster and put it under the pillow on his lap.

She texted, and within seconds there was a knock at the door. She opened the door and Robert burst in with a camera and his pistol drawn. When he saw that West wasn’t handcuffed, he turned angrily towards Alisha. “You lying bitch!” He then pointed the gun at West. West shot through the pillow two times and Robert fell to the floor.

“You better get out of here, my dear. I’ll take it from here,” said West.

Alisha was so scared and horrified that she could hardly talk. “I ... I’m so sorry, so sorry ...” she said. Then she had a brief moment of clarity, “his phone, it has a video of me ...”

“Take it,” said West.

Alisha fished the phone from his pocket and tried not to get any of the gushing blood on her hands, but it was unavoidable. She ran out and down the stairs. She ran around the corner to Riggy. He hugged her hard. Soon sirens blared and several police cars arrived at the front of the hotel. He tried to wipe her tears, but it was no use.

She was in shock all the way home. She wasn't able to tell him how it went down for almost an hour, and even then, it was a sketchy description.

Riggy helped her to get a shower and get into bed. He took all of her *Aurora* costume, including the wig and the heels and stuffed it into a large black trash bag. He then threw some trash on top of the clothes and tied up the bag. He then threw the bag into the smelliest dumpster he could find, which was behind a Chinese restaurant. Then he stopped at a bridge over the river and threw the phone as far as he could.

The next morning the media was abuzz with the story. It even appeared on CNN. The headline in the city newspaper read, "Police Commissioner kills disgruntled ex-detective in self-defense." There was not a hint of *Aurora* in any of the accounts.

Riggy and Alisha were different people now. The experience brought them closer together, whether it was the shared guilt, or the good fortune of not going to jail. They knew they were responsible for the death of someone, even if he brought it on himself.

By now they had spent most of the money, which they now thought of as *dirty*. They decided to donate what they had left, which was still considerable, anonymously to charities dealing with sex trafficking.

They never spoke of this summer again.

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