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Dismas

Emily Bradford

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The night air is so quiet, still weighed down by the presence of an evening rain that nothing seems to stir it until the boy comes tearing out of the narrow street. He ducks his head, his gait one of gangly youth just discovering the power of his own legs. His jacket bulges where it is zipped over the small leather bag held close to his ribs.

He stops. He is still panting from the quickness of his escape, the exhilaration, the shock of what he's just done. Having finally tried it, he marvels at the simplicity: she was easy enough to find, her heeled boots clacked loudly on the cobblestones, her back to him, hair swinging. She was unaware, soothed, perhaps, by the tender glow of lights. The city was lulled by the night, retiring dutifully like an old nun. It assured this girl that nothing was lurking, and she believed it. It made it all the easier for him, deft as one of the feral cats the city cared for, to spring on her.

The girl had jumped, yet froze as he twisted her around and shoved her to the wall. He'd heard a noise catch in her throat when the wind was knocked out of her. Her bag, dangling at her hip, was easy to reach. Feeling him pulling at it, she regained her voice enough to choke out a protest. He could have rocked his hips against her, mocking, terrorizing her, like he's watched his brother do before. But there was the chance that she would scream, and that would be the end of an otherwise profitable night. Besides, he was barely confident enough to steal from the woman, let alone be carnal with her; he was on edge, and wanted the crime to be over with. The moment he had detached the little bag from its owner, tugging the strap roughly over her head, he had scarpered into the city's shadows, finding sanctuary under her black habit.

Now he catches his breath in a deserted piazza, a mile away from his victim. He stands dumbly, foolishly, disheveled and holding a woman's purse. The pride and disbelief he felt fades, as the openness seems to indict him. Slowly, as though lost, he looks around, then retreats to sit on the steps of the church behind him. He opens the purse and its contents tumble out: hair ties, receipts, a bottle of large capsules, half white, half blue. A rosary, a tampon. A wallet with two large bills, three small, seven coins. "Stupid bitch," he says, out loud, gleefully pocketing the money. His voice comes out high-pitched, uncontrolled, still weakened by the adrenaline surge. He says it again, forcing his voice to come out deeper and steadier.

He soon finds the woman's phone, new and hardly smudged by 49 her clean fingers. Triumphant, he weighs it in his hand as if trying to guess its worth. It falls and hits the marble step, making him flinch. He picks it up – no damage.

He pulls a cigarette from his own pocket and lights it up, another new practice. The smoke curls into the night like breath in the winter, although tonight is warm and humid. Beside him, the phone vibrates suddenly, and he jumps up wildly. He recognizes the noise, settles back down, and glances at the text that has lit up the screen. *Where are you?* It says.

He clicks it off, goes back to his cigarette.

It buzzes again:

Where are you?

He stares at the screen for a long time. Now he is shaking, though not from the nicotine.

“Stupid bitch,” he whispers as the embers fall and die.

