

The Trasher

He pulled off into the motel squatted off the highway like a tired animal, its neon sign flickering through the falling snow. Louis “Louie” DeLuca killed the engine and let the silence rush in, just the soft tick of cooling metal and his own breath fogging the windshield. Running had crossed his mind. Florida, Mexico, anywhere warm and anonymous. Running meant hope. Hope was fragile. Hunting was simple.

He slid the pistol from the glove box, its weight familiar and comforting in a way that excited him in a way that could make his dick hard. A travel agent, he thought bitterly. That's what his life was supposed to be now maps, brochures and smiling promises of escape. Not this. Never this. Not only did this man know his name and face, he knew enough to end him without lifting a finger.

Louie stepped out into the night, the snow crunched under his boots, loud as breaking bones. He froze, listening. Somewhere a television murmured behind thin walls the laughter canned and distant. A door slammed two buildings over. He pressed himself into the shadow of a

pickup truck, heart hammering, eyes locked on the row of doors. The man's room was at the end with the digits "17" just under the peep hole. One light on, the curtains half drawn. Louie moved slow and deliberate, every step measured. He became smaller, quieter. A shape between other shapes. The cold took a bite through his coat. He sharpened his thoughts. If the man walked out of his room right now, it would be over in seconds. One clean shot. Problem solved. Louie watched the door like it might blink first.

Images crowded his mind of airport terminals and cheerful clients. Business cards with his name printed cleanly on them. All of it balanced on this one moment. Louie thought if he let this man leave Connecticut alive, everything in his life before and after would collapse into a police report and grainy photos on the news. A shadow passed behind the curtain. Louie raised the gun, arms steady despite the tremor in his chest. Snow drifted down, soft and indifferent, settling on his shoulders as he lined up the door. He wasn't prey anymore.

He was waiting.

The door finally opened, Louie's breath caught as James Galante stepped out into the snow, collar turned up, face tight with irritation. For half a heartbeat, the world narrowed to the man's chest, the clean center mass Louie had rehearsed in his head a hundred times. Then another shape followed. Small. Bundled in a pink coat, a knit hat pulled down over dark hair. Melanie.

Muscle memory took over and Louie raised the gun anyway, arms locking, sight settling on Galante's back. This was the moment he had been waiting for, it was now or never. One squeeze and the future rewrote itself. No more looking over his shoulder and whispering in hotel lobbies. A quick puff of sound cut through the cold like a knife, the girl laughed. Galante turned slightly and rested a casual hand on his daughter's shoulder, saying something inaudible. The

sight twisted something ugly and tight in Louie's chest. He wasn't a monster, he had told himself he was a survivor. There was a difference. There had to be. He was human. His finger trembled on the trigger. He imagined the sound echoing off the concrete, too loud. Doors flying open. Witnesses. Screams. Sirens. Melanie's face froze in a moment she'd carry forever, whether the bullet hit her or not.

Snow crunched as James and his daughter moved down the walkway, their backs to him now. Every step they took felt like a door closing. Louie lowered the gun. The cold rushed back in, sharper than before. He stayed in the shadows as they disappeared into the glow of a nearby car, the engine starting, tires starting. Tires hissing against the ice under the snow. The red taillights bled into the dark and were gone.

It was then Louie realized his jaw ached from clenching it. He hadn't pulled the trigger but the hunt wasn't over. He slipped the gun back into his coat and melted into the night, knowing one thing with brutal clarity: mercy bought him James, not safety.

The game did not end in the parking lot. It only revealed itself.

For years the Trasher, James Galante, had been the shadow behind the threat, the voice on the phone, the man who sent others to do the dirty work. Power had always insulated him and distance only made him more dangerous, but her, in the open, walking his daughter back to a warm room and a late night movie, he was something else entirely. Exposed.

Louie understood that now. Watching from the dark, he saw the truth of his current situation. The Trasher wasn't untouchable. He was flesh and breath and routine. A man who could bleed. A man distracted by room keys and car doors, not to mention fatherly promises. DeLuca's stalking stripped away any illusion of helplessness. He wasn't hiding and just waiting to be caught and pray for mercy. He had driven straight into the lion's den with murder on his

mind. Gun raised. Fingers ready. The calculations had been complete. The only thing that stopped him was timing, not conscience, not fear of James Galante, just the complication of a child and the math of witnesses. That mattered, because it meant Louie was still dangerous.

Still playing the game and still choosing violence, somewhere down the line James would feel it, the shift in the atmosphere and the sense that something had could happen and would happen if he wasn't careful. He would replay this trip in his head, the cold, the motel, the way the night had felt so quiet. When the truth surfaced he would learn how close death had stood behind him while he played the role of a father. Something would harden inside him. The rules would change.

He thought lowering the gun bought him time to get James "The Trasher" Galante at a later chance. What it really bought him was judgement. By hunting a boss instead of disappearing, he signed his own death sentence. He proved he wasn't done and couldn't be ignored or allowed to live.

In a game like this, mercy was only a delay. Once hesitation had been sensed, it wouldn't be business. It would be personal, as Louis "Louie" DeLuca would be unable to breathe, developing a problem concentrating and becoming restless, while he is strangled from behind, by the person in the back seat.