

Chapter 1 Florist

It was his fifth and final collection for Tuesday. Frank Barletta liked Banali Flowers in the same private, suspicious way some men liked churches. The shop sat in a pocket of cool, damp air, apart from Ferry Street, with its sweating glass, green stems, and the faint, expensive sweetness flowers gave off as they died. Robert Banali specialized in peonies, which Frank considered a serious virtue in a world overrun with fraud. Big, soft-headed things in blush pink, old blood, cream, coral, and yellow so pale it looked haunted. They sat in their buckets under the shop lights like extravagant secrets. Frank never mentioned them. He came in, collected what was owed for protection, and allowed himself the weakness of looking too long.

The bell over the door gave a thin chime as his tall, toned frame entered. Rob looked up from behind the counter and froze for half a heartbeat as Frank's dark-clad figure approached, looming over him like a shadow. Rob arranged his face into something meant to pass for welcome. It did not pass. Frank saw the sweat at the man's hairline, the quick swallow, and the hand flattening on the glass countertop as though he needed help staying upright. Outside, the March sky had the color of old dishwater. Inside, condensation trembled on the florist cases, and the petals shone under the lights. Rob reached beneath the register and brought up an envelope marked for Louie Spano, then poked it across the counter toward Frank, as if extended contact would foul his hands.

Frank scowled and took it. Held it. Weighed it once in his palm.

Light.

He lifted his eyes to Rob's face.

Silence had texture. Frank knew how to use it. Nico had taught him years earlier, when Frank was still young enough to mistake instruction for affection. Louie filled rooms with noise because that was all he had. Nico understood something cleaner: give a man enough quiet, and his own fear would start speaking for you. Frank said nothing now. He glared at Rob and watched him unravel.

"Frank," Rob said, too quickly, already bleeding words, "before you say anything, I got something for you. Something special." He came around the counter with both hands raised in

a little peace offering and hurried to the front window, where he lifted a potted peony with the care of a priest handling relics. It was rare, even Frank could see that. The bloom was half-open, the center a soft yellow fading outward into white. "You won't find many like this," Rob said. "I put it aside. For you."

Frank took the plant in one hand and kept the envelope in the other. He looked at the flower. Then at Rob. Still nothing.

Rob rushed to fill the void. "March is dead, Frank, you know that, dreary, cold, raining all the time—bad month." He pivoted behind the counter and pulled out his order calendar. "See, no weddings, only one funeral," he flipped more pages, "no real holidays, people aren't buying. Products late, shipments are backed up, everybody's squeezing everybody. I'm waiting on inventory. I'm short this week. That's all."

Frank set the peony on the counter with a care that felt worse than a threat. Then he reached out, caught a fistful of Rob's shirt, and dragged him forward across the glass. Rob made a small sound through his nose, not pain yet, only surprise at how quickly explanations became consequences. Frank brought the florist close enough to smell cigarettes, wool, and the cold on him from outside.

"What," Frank said softly, "are you trying to say, Banali?"

Rob's eyes flicked once toward the back room. That was enough. Frank felt the answer before he turned. Borrowed nerve. Rented backbone.

"I'm saying," Rob managed, finding a voice that did not belong to him, "I got a better deal. This is the last payment you get from me."

Frank let him go. Rob stumbled back, clutching his shirtfront, trying to stand by his own decision now that he had spoken it aloud. The curtain at the rear doorway shifted. Two men stepped out of the workroom, tall, broad, and heavy, arms straining the confines of their dark coats, carrying themselves with the confidence of men who believed size was strategy. Their hands stayed visible. That was deliberate. They wanted him to understand this was a message before it became a mess. Frank recognized the move for what it was. Nico, testing Louie's border, one nervous shopkeeper at a time. A florist today. A butcher, a bookmaker, a warehouse tomorrow. Territory changed hands first in whispers, then in blood.

The room seemed to tighten around them. Refrigeration units hummed. Water dripped from cut stems onto the tile. One loose peony petal had fallen to the floor and clung wetly to the sole of one man's shoe. Frank looked at it and, not for the first time, thought that beauty in this world was usually something fragile placed too close to ruin.

One of the men gave him a smile too dead to be friendly. "You heard the man."

Frank picked up the potted flower again. "I did."

He walked to the door and let himself out into the gray afternoon. No hurry. No scene. Behind him, through the slowly closing door, he heard relief loosen the room. Rob laughing too soon. The low murmur of congratulations. The ugly little sounds men made when they mistook surviving one minute for owning the next. Frank crossed to a black SUV at the curb, its hood still warm. He opened the passenger door. The keys were still in the ignition—size bred arrogance. Stupidity was never far behind. He set the peony gently on the passenger seat and pulled the seat belt around the clay pot to keep it from tipping. Through the windshield, he could see the blurred shapes inside the florist shop, Rob and the two men drawing closer now that they believed the danger had left with him.

Frank got behind the wheel and closed the door. For a second, he sat with both hands on the wheel, looking out the side window into the gray light at the storefront. He twisted the key, and the engine turned over with a low growl. Beside him, the peony trembled with the motor's lust for movement.

There were times for speeches. Times for warnings. Times to let a man walk back his mistake. But if Nico was leaning into Louie's territory, hesitation would read as permission. Rob had not just come up short. He had chosen a side.

Frank had always preferred clarity.

He put the SUV in gear, then floored the accelerator, whipped the wheel sharply left, and careened through the front of Banale Flowers.

The impact, an eruption of glass, metal, and deafening noise. The storefront blew inward. Shelving snapped. Water from a dozen buckets lifted into the air and fell back as shining rain. Stems, dark soil, ribbon, splintered wood, shattered pots, and bodies rose together

in violent confusion. One of the big men vanished beneath the hood. The other hit the window frame and folded on the way down. Rob disappeared in the collapse of his own display, buried under peonies and broken glass. Then the world went still except for the panting engine and the soft patter of wreckage settling.

Frank opened the driver's door and stepped out into the ruin. Cold air moved through the blown-out storefront. His shoes crunched over glass and wet stems. The shop no longer smelled sweet. It smelled split open: dirt, gasoline, radiator heat, bruised flowers, blood. His coat had picked up a stripe of dirt across the front. He brushed at it once, then looked down at the nearest of Nico's men, tangled against what had been a display table. Rob made a wet, choking sound to the left and pushed himself upright.

"I think your deal just came crashing to an end," Frank said.

Blood ran from a cut along Rob's scalp into one eye. He looked less defiant now. Smaller, too. Frank turned back to the SUV, reached in through the passenger side, and grabbed the rim of the clay pot, which broke off in his hand. He dropped it to the floorboards and scooped up the remains, holding the peony. The flower had survived. Not untouched, but upright. A little dark soil had spilled, but the bloom itself remained strangely composed, pale and luminous in the middle of all that wreckage.

Frank regarded it for a beat, then looked at Rob, kneeling in the wreckage of his own shop.

"I'll be back next month," Frank said. "Protection just got more expensive." He glanced once around the shattered storefront. "Obviously, this is a dangerous area."

Then he carried the flower out with him, leaving Rob in the wreckage of his own bad decision, and drove off before the sirens could decide who the neighborhood belonged to.