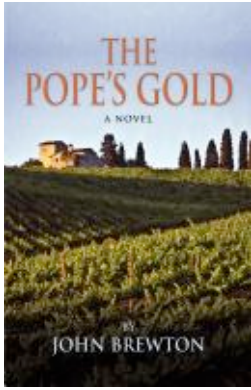




# THE POPE'S GOLD

A NOVEL

BY  
JOHN BREWTON



*A young Californian, Nick Manicapelli, finds romance and dangerous adversaries when he inherits a rundown vineyard in Italy. The Italian fattoria (farm) holds an ancient secret as well that will change Nick's life forever. Set against the lush agricultural countryside in the province of Umbria, THE POPE'S GOLD is a story of love and wine, family and friends.*

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## Prologue

The small blue car traveled the four lane highway to Orvieto at a slow pace in the right hand lane. The driver, Giuseppe Bartolino, happily sang along with the music blasting from the radio speaker. The windows were rolled down on the summer day allowing the countryside to share his exuberance. Other drivers were not amused however as they barreled down upon the obstruction to their rapid pace. They swung around the car honking and shaking their fists. But Giuseppe was oblivious to their oaths. It was Tuesday, his day off from the usual duties at his bar located in the nearby hamlet of Monte Vicino. He was headed to the railway station in order to pick up his friend Carlo's *fidanzata*, Francesca Taurisano. Carlo called him earlier for the simple request as he had some business to take care of and could not break away. She could easily catch a taxi, after all it was only a fifteen minute drive, but Giuseppe liked to get out and about on his day off so he was happy to help his friend.

Francesca taught English at a school in Siena and did not own a car. She and Carlo and Giuseppe and his wife were a foursome when it came to activities that involved sharing their lives. Her free time was devoted to being with Carlo, soul mates who found each other in their late forties. The burly barkeeper kept below the speed limit so as not to arrive too early. The train from Siena was notorious for never deviating from its schedule and barring the odd *sciopero* always pulled into the station precisely on time. Giuseppe leisurely departed the road at the appointed exit to the unknown relief of those drivers who were yet to encounter the moving roadblock. Shortly he pulled into the parking lot and went to greet his friend.

Francesca stepped off the train into a bear hug from Giuseppe. She had the dyed red hair popular with many others her age in Italy. She was full-figured, a little taller than the norm, and vivacious. She immediately began chattering away about her recent trials and triumphs as Giuseppe took her overnight bag in a meaty paw and directed her to his vehicle.

*THE POPE'S GOLD*

Once they were strapped into their seats Giuseppe set off with an alacrity that startled passersby. Those drivers whom had directed enmity towards Giuseppe on the arriving leg of his short journey would have been astounded at the turn of speed his little car demonstrated returning to Monte Vicino. Normally a fifteen minute jaunt, they pulled up to a dirt road guarded by a weather beaten gate in scarcely twelve.

The gate hung more or less from two rusty hinges, the third eaten away with corrosion and neglect and sagging partly ajar in the roadway. Giuseppe got out and heaved it to the side with such force the remaining hinges gave up the ghost and the remains of the gate promptly fell down next to the fence in a cloud of dust and rust.

“Oh, well,” he shrugged dusting off his hands, “one more thing for Carlo to address when he has time.”

Francesca nodded in agreement as they motored up the curving road to the ancient dilapidated farmhouse. The large wooden door was open in hospitality. Francesca went inside as Carlo fetched her bag.

A blood-curdling scream from inside alerted Giuseppe that something was very wrong.

Carlo lay sprawled on the tiled floor, his head at an odd angle, a trail of blood oozing from beneath. Francesca dropped to her knees and cradled the head, smoothing back his hair. Giuseppe joined her on the floor and checked for a pulse.

“He's alive?” she fearfully asked.

Giuseppe sadly wagged his head from side to side in the negative. He looked up to the balcony to see part of the railing missing and the freshly exposed splinters of the broken wooden balustrade. He picked up a piece of wood on the floor and examined it. The wood seemed sound. Broken, but through stress not rotteness or age.

“I thought he was in a meeting,” said Francesca stammered tearfully.

“I guess. He didn't give me any details.”

He went into the kitchen and dialed the police.

## Chapter One

The digital alarm on the side table next to the bed cast its eerie green figures through the gloom of darkness as 2:33 in the morning. Nick Manicapelli woke up to what he assumed was a rumble of thunder and checked the time. He groaned and rolled over to resume his body's restorative sleep. A minute later another muted rumble began only this one increased in duration and sound until the building was shaking, tossing Nick out of bed onto the floor along with the redistribution of the contents of the room. The shaking lasted thirty seconds, but felt like a lifetime as he realized there was no way he could make it out of the building. But the modern construction held and the apartment stayed intact. Nick delved into the drawer of the side table to retrieve a flashlight as a test of the light switch indicated the electricity had gone out. With the narrow beam leading the way, he traipsed sleepily into the living room to find the contents scattered randomly over the floor space - bookshelves lying face down, almost everything that had been on the walls now on the floor except for the flat screen television which was bolted to the wall. In the kitchen the doors of the refrigerator and freezer had popped open and frozen steaks, ice cubes and at least two varieties of ice cream swam in a broken glass mixture of orange juice, milk, eggs, fresh vegetables and cans of beer. A bottle of wine, the aftermarket stopper missing, lay on its side pumping its red essence into the sea of goop. Nick was too shocked to even pick it up. He went back to the bedroom, threw on last night's clothes and made his way outside to gather with his equally disturbed neighbors.

Once outside the sound of sirens from emergency vehicles and fire trucks split the normal silence, the only luminance provided by random stars overhead. Nick pulled out his cell phone to see if he had service. No luck there. Towers must be down, he thought. He looked closer to the face of the miniature device. Oops, dammit, he had forgotten to recharge the device. No power and no way to charge it.

*THE POPE'S GOLD*

Then he remembered the charging cable which was plugged into the cigarette lighter receptacle of his car.

He headed for the underground parking and located his little convertible with the flashlight. Starting the engine and quickly plugging in the cable and attaching it to the cell phone, he had instant power to the battery. He immediately punched the name of his mother to quick dial her home phone. She answered on the second ring.

“Mother, are you and the grandparents okay?”

“No, we're not okay,” she yelled at him, “it's just not civilized being woken up in the middle of the night.”

Nick laughed in spite of himself. “I don't think Mother Nature respects time.”

“Oh, in that case, yes, we're okay. Shaken up, but we'll have to assess the damage in the morning. How are things on your end?”

“About the same, everyone is wandering around the streets waiting to see if the aftershocks are going to be serious.”

“In my experience we've already had the worst of it. I'm going back to bed. And I suggest you do the same.”

“I'm going to try and get a radio report. See where the epicenter was.”

“Say goodnight, dear.”

“Goodnight. I'll call you in the morning.”

Nick fired up the diminutive vehicle and searched the radio for news. He finally found a station in Marin County. “...appears to have its origin in the south bay area...”

That was all he needed to spring into action. He roared out of the parking garage onto the street, waved at one of his neighbors and headed south, aiming for the warehouse district. At first he made progress, nothing in the road. Six blocks away from the apartment he saw the first bricks in the road. He slowed down and let the nimble steering of the Alfa take him around the obstructions. A fire truck rushed up behind him with blaring siren. Nick moved to the curb to let it pass and then followed. He and the fire truck made it two more blocks and that was it. Now there were whole buildings collapsed, debris spilling into the street. His vehicle's headlights were no longer necessary - police and ambulances completely blocked the



*JOHN BREWTON*

intersection as powerful temporary lighting probed the ruined houses for life. Nick executed a nifty U-turn and retraced his path to the next intersection and tried another route. He was sweating in the still, humid air and very worried. He managed to get on the freeway and was making good time until flashing red lights warned of danger ahead. The freeway had collapsed and the police were in the process of cordoning off the thoroughfare.

“Shit,” he pounded the steering wheel in frustration. He threw the gear lever into reverse and backed up until he could take an alternate exit. Now on the access road he could see more police had the intersection blocked so he took the first street to the right and went looking for another way around the maelstrom. This time he was stopped by a patrol car and bluntly ordered out of the area.

Nick tossed and turned the remainder of the night away. His mind was going a hundred miles an hour and it was near dawn when deep sleep finally came. He was awakened by the alarm blaring rock and roll. Power had returned. Nick took a quick shower, shaved and got dressed for work. Studying himself in the mirror, Nick Manicapelli saw a trim six footer with thinning blond hair. At the young/old age of thirty depending on which side of the fence one sat, he had parlayed an MBA from Stanford into a wine distribution company with his parents connections - his father owned Manicapelli Cellars in Napa Valley, a family winery established back in the nineteen twenties and his mother was a Doyle, of the society Doyle's, who provided the financing to start his company. His parents had divorced when he was five. His father had custody of Nick and his older brother during the summers and he spent his youth learning everything his father could pound into his head about growing grapes and the wine industry. After six years his company was successful and Nick had earned a good reputation in the business. But his concern this morning was for his warehouse, piled high with cases upon cases of expensive wine.

He heard the raucous sound of a trolley car so he walked to the nearest trolley stop and took the cable car to his office which overlooked Ghirardelli Square. Everything in this part of San

*THE POPE'S GOLD*

Francisco seemed to be working as normal and he began to wonder if he had imagined the whole thing. Earthquake, what earthquake?

He was pleased to find his secretary and assistant, Miss Clark, with her reassuring matronly presence, at her desk when he sailed into the office.

She gazed at him serenely, “good morning, Mr. Manicapelli. Were you shaken or stirred last night?”

Nick admitted he really hadn't seen much to get excited about on his way over. The office appeared normal. Electricity was on, phones worked, was he living in the same town that tossed him out of bed last night?

“Have you heard from the warehouse?”

“No, I figured if there was a problem Obediah would have called.”

“I need to get over there pronto. I tried last night, but the damage in that direction stopped me.”

Nick went into his office and closed the door. The door remained closed most of the time as he kept a fairly messy desk. While he couldn't justify the state of confusion which reigned in the office he was able to put his hand quickly on any document he needed, or so he maintained. His secretary and the cleaning service were not allowed in as he was scared they would inadvertently move something important and then he surely would be unable to locate it. All meetings with clients were held in a separate room.

First he called the warehouse which was in Hunter's Point. His warehouse foreman, Obediah, an ex-basketball player whom Nick had known at Stanford, was strong as the proverbial ox, but hampered by an old Achilles heel injury which had ended a promising career. There was no answer. The phone kept ringing, but there was no pickup. Strange, Nick thought, the call didn't even roll over to the answering machine. He then tried Obediah's cell.

He answered right away. “Hey, Nick, you need to get over here. Things are bad, man.”

“Why didn't you call me on my cell?”

“I just got here. They finally opened the road. We're doing damage control now.”

*JOHN BREWTON*

Nick dashed out and asked Miss Clark if he could borrow her car. She handed him her keys. This happened all too frequently as Nick had given the firm's only dedicated parking space to her. He drove a little faster than normal down Van Ness as far as he could. When he ran into the first obstruction he veered right and took a very circuitous route to the west side of town which ended up with him approaching the warehouse district from the south. Finally he made a right turn into Hunter's Point warehouse district and weaved his way through the complex and took the second turn which lead to his warehouse. Other than a few new cracks in the road surface nothing seemed untoward. He noticed a pile of overturned crates partially blocking the street and then saw the overturned crane. With a renewed sense of urgency he pulled up with a squeal of braking tires and mounted the concrete stairs to the door. Before he could open the door he noticed the liquid oozing out from under the threshold. It wasn't pretty. There's not much optimism when hundreds of gallons of primo wine have escaped their containers. Cases of wine were strewn about like so many children's play blocks. Most were soaked with their contents and were subsequently falling apart. On the other side Obediah was pushing a wall of wine and broken glass out the loading dock doors with a large squeegee.

He looked around. "Where are the rest of the guys?"

"They're outside hosing down the street."

Nick went to the loading dock and sure enough, two men were using hoses to wash the valuable commodity which was now nothing more than waste liquid towards the bay.

"I hope the fish appreciate fine wine."

Obediah grinned, "I doubt it. No discriminating palate."

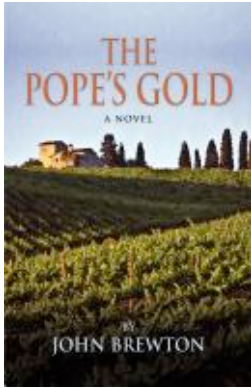
Nick grabbed a push broom and went to help. They worked silently for a half hour. He made a slow circuit of the entire warehouse, mentally taking inventory.

"Christ, did anything survive?"

"Most of the champagne made it. The thicker walls of the bottles helped. And the lowest stacked cases are okay. But everything else shifted enough to hit the floor. How's your insurance?"

*THE POPE'S GOLD*

“I think we're about to find out,” he said ruefully. “When the guys get through with their hosing job, take an inventory and send it to me as a PDF. I'll take responsibility for calling the wineries. Man, this is really going to set us back. I guess we'll just have to suck it up and see what happens. Thanks for everything,” they shook hands. “I'll be in touch.”



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