

SILVER HARVEST

The Pinstriped Bandit - Book One

JANET PENN

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*Dedicated to the memory of C. Z. Wick, my unofficial big brother,
with thanks and gratitude for his support and encouragement in
the beginning stages of this book. He is sorely missed.*

Chapter 1

The Road to San Luis Obispo, California
Monday, October 16, 1893

“E verybody out! Let’s go.” I heard a blast of shotguns and the sound of bullets whistling through the air, ricocheting off boulders and cliffs amid the golden autumn hills. The sounds jolted me from a catnap, the first sleep I’d had since leaving Napa two days earlier. Jostling about in the stagecoach’s cramped quarters made it difficult to relax, but sleep had finally come. The humiliation of being caught in a compromising position in the wine cave with Daniel, coupled with the shock of being banished from my home and the uncertainty of what was to come, had left me mentally exhausted.

Straightening up on the narrow, leather-covered bench, I was jabbed in the ribs by one of my corset stays. I had intended to loosen the damn thing when we had disembarked the train in Santa Margarita to board the stage, but didn’t for fear that Jim, our stagecoach driver, would leave without me. For some reason the disagreeable man had taken an immediate dislike to me when he’d seen my twelve pieces of luggage and four hatboxes.

As the cracking and whizzing sounds of bullets escalated, Theresa Gallagher, the young woman on her way home to San Luis Obispo from a business trip in San Francisco, and Mr. and Mrs. Davenport, the elderly couple returning from Oakland, looked surprised, even nervous.

The leather curtain creaked as I rolled it up. Dust rose in a gritty cloud, leaving us choking as the stagecoach rolled to a halt. The scent of dirt and chaparral filled the coach, offering a change from the stench of Mrs. Davenport's cheap rose perfume. A bit north of San Luis Obispo, County Road One along the slope of the Santa Lucia Mountains was steep and narrow. It looked like a precarious place to stop. Only four miles from the summit, we teetered between a five-foot-high rock embankment and a sheer fifty-foot drop. We were a mere speck in a vast, rugged landscape dotted with oak trees and blue-green serpentine rocks.

Three pistol-waving men walked quickly toward us through the early-morning haze. They had apparently jumped down from the steep embankment and were in front of the coach. Dazed for a moment, I wondered if the drama unfolding before me was a dream. More pistol shots rang through the air, and it became abundantly clear I was wide-awake. I turned to my fellow passengers, feeling the panic swell in my chest.

"Oh my God! What's happening?" My own voice sounded distant.

"It's a holdup!" Mr. Davenport's tone was tense but controlled as he put his arms around his wife, pulling her close to muffle her cries.

"No! Thaddeus! No!" Mrs. Davenport's voice was barely audible as she gripped her bonnet with both hands and covered her face with its brim.

"We gotta be calm." Theresa sounded determined, even composed. "I been robbed before, and if we just do what they say, they probably won't hurt us."

"*Probably* won't hurt us?" My heart raced.

“We just gotta do as they say,” Theresa quietly reiterated. “It’s the only thing we can do.”

The only thing we can do? She was right. We were trapped. Trapped on a deserted road, high in the mountains of a desolate place. A sickening, bottomed-out feeling began to gnaw in the pit of my stomach as my knees started to knock against each other uncontrollably.

I peered out the window again. A scream caught in my chest as shots popped from one bandit’s Colt .45 pistol and he again ordered, “Everyone out!” Then, in a deafening cacophony, the other men fired more shots and shouted at us to exit the stagecoach.

Two of the gunmen wore dark blue bandanas concealing the lower parts of their faces and leather chaps with burnt-orange fringe, flickering like flames as they loped toward us, their mud-crusted boots thumping. One bandit in a black hat with a braided rope band displayed muscular, tanned arms beneath the rolled-up sleeves of his blue flannel work shirt, while the other’s topper was gray felt and sweat-stained. As he sprinted toward us, the fringe on his leather jacket fluttered wildly, and the beading on the shoulders and yoke shimmered like something very hot—or cold.

The third man, maybe the leader, was dressed in a fashionable dark brown, pinstriped suit with narrow lapels. As his long legs strode purposefully toward the stagecoach, he was the perfect contrast to his hooligans: string tie staying neatly tucked inside his vest, expensive snakeskin boots, silk handkerchief with gold embroidery along the edges for his mask, and hat—with a snakeskin band that matched his boots—stylishly resting below his brow line.

This dandy grabbed our lead horse’s bit, cocked his pistol, and pointed it at Jim. “You, driver, throw down your weapon, please. Then jump down off the box and step toward me with your hands up.” His tone was oddly polite.

I watched Jim's shotgun drop to the ground, landing with a thud in the middle of the road. As Jim leapt from the driver's box, his coat billowed in the updraft. For a surreal moment, it reminded me of the parachute I had seen at the world's fair in Paris. He planted his knee-high boots firmly, secured his hat, and extended his hands into the air. Clearly, not the first time he'd done this.

The pinstriped bandit stuck his six-shooter in Jim's midriff and rummaged his clothes for unseen weapons. Finding nothing, he told Jim to get back in his seat and hold the reins. "And don't try anything."

The robber in the leather jacket swung open the stagecoach door. "Get out! Alla ya!" His head was just inches from my face, and the stink of his breath emanated through his bandana, hitting me like a wall.

Mr. Davenport helped his shaking wife out of the coach. Theresa followed, cowering as she took her place next to the couple at the side of the road. As I stepped out, the foul-smelling man seized my arm and threw me to the ground. My corset stays jabbed deep into my rib cage, the gravel road ripping through my stockings and scraping my legs. The pain burned from my knees to my ankles.

Theresa started to run to me. "Don't hurt her!"

Drawing back his fist, the bandit growled, "Shut up, bitch!"

Theresa jumped back, shielding her face with her hands. Her quick reaction revealed that she was no stranger to violence.

When I tried to stand, the bandit roughly grabbed the beaded neckline of my blue silk dress, ripping it down to my waist. Blue and silver glass beads scattered onto the ground around us. My arms flew protectively to my bosom protruding above my tight corset.

"That's enough!" The pinstriped bandit walked toward us, glass beads crunching beneath his boots. "Silas, I told you to take it easy when we got here. You keep an eye on the driver.

Let me take care of this.” He tipped his fancy hat and offered me his hand.

Trying to cover myself with the torn pieces of my dress, I went from shaking in my high-heeled boots to being infuriated by his presumptuousness. I felt mocked. It was perverse to be mannerly and attentive and to offer me his hand during a holdup.

“I don’t need your help,” I snapped. Was I unmistakably rude? Yes, I meant to be. Then, flinging aside the torn pieces of silk shielding my corset, I defiantly stared the man in the eye, coming to my feet without his assistance.

We stood face-to-face for a moment, his luminous blue eyes narrowing at me over the top of his handkerchief. He smelled of grit, body odor, and talcum powder. This fop’s arrogance had enraged me to the point of all but forgetting the pain in my ribs and legs. Then, pressing my lips together and smiling demurely, I brought my knee up quick and hard between his legs. I had never been much for controlling my emotions, and it was satisfying—him doubling over in pain and gasping for air.

The other two gunmen ran for me, one grabbing my arms and pinning them behind my back while the other drew back his fist, his face a dark snarl. Theresa screamed.

“Leave her . . . leave her be,” the dandy bandit managed to get out as he limped around in a circle, bent over at the waist. He straightened, took several deep breaths, and then, in a gentle, low, and kindly voice, said, “We sincerely apologize, miss, for our behavior. This won’t take long if everyone cooperates.” He turned to the Davenports and Theresa.

“Please form a line and keep your hands up. Ladies, please drop your handbags to the ground.” Then he looked at Jim and said, “Driver, throw down the box.”

Although angered and bewildered, I must admit his gentlemanly manner and articulate, almost eloquent speech intrigued me. It was obvious he was no ordinary roughneck, but a man of education and refinement.

Jim reached into the stagecoach's front boot, rummaged through the mail sacks and luggage, lifted out the dirt-caked Wells Fargo strongbox, and dropped it over the front wheel well.

"Thank you kindly." The pinstriped bandit spoke to Jim as though they were old friends. He pulled out a short-handled ax and began hacking at the strongbox's reinforced iron bands and padlock. With one final blow, the box broke open, scattering a copious number of bundled bills. As he picked up the money and stuffed it into his leather satchel, he nodded at his accomplices, signaling them to get to work.

The robbers checked the elderly couple first, removing Mr. Davenport's open-faced gold watch from his front vest pocket. The shirt-sleeved bandit held up the watch to show his accomplices before he dropped it into his saddlebag. Powerless against the assailants, Mr. Davenport dropped the coins and bills from his trousers into the bag. Mrs. Davenport removed her earrings and bracelet, but when she was told to remove her wedding ring, she began to weep.

"Just give it to them, Malvina." Mr. Davenport looked tormented by his wife's tears. Mrs. Davenport's wrinkled face turned red from exertion as she pried the ring from her fat finger.

Theresa had no jewelry, only a few bills in her handbag, which she readily surrendered.

Next, it was my turn. The shirt-sleeved bandit held my arms while the one in the leather jacket searched me from behind—to keep from being kneed in the groin, no doubt. He slowly moved his hands over the contours of my body and caressed my corseted breasts. Wiggling in his accomplice's grasp, I could only manage to grind the heel of my boot onto his foot, which, unfortunately, didn't faze him.

"Silas!" The pinstriped bandit came up behind him. "Leave her alone! Let me do this." As he gently checked my pockets and the folds of my dress, he spoke to me in a soft,

comforting voice. “I do so regret the intrusion, miss, and hope you’re not afraid. We aren’t going to hurt you, and we’ll soon be on our way.”

When he stood up, he was staring at the one thing I had hoped he wouldn’t see—the magnificent emerald and diamond ring hanging from the gold chain around my neck and wedged between my breasts. The four-carat emerald surrounded by sixteen half-carat brilliant-cut diamonds had been in my family for nearly a hundred years. Nonna, my grandmother, had secretly given it to me after my father banished me from Napa. She had told me the ring was worth about \$5,000 and instructed me to sell it when I got to Los Angeles.

“Pardon me, miss, I don’t mean to be improper.” He slowly slid his strong, warm hand down my cleavage—moist with perspiration from fear and heat. His nimble, long fingers grasped the ring, lingering a moment before he drew it up.

“Please, don’t take my ring,” I pleaded. “It was my grandmother’s. *Please*. Take anything else, but don’t take my ring.”

“Sorry, miss, but I’ve been waiting for something like this.” He snapped the chain and put the ring in his pocket.

“*Please*, don’t take my ring! It’s all I have! *Please!*”

“ENOUGH!” His tone was abrupt and startling, his hand held up in command. Just as quickly, his disposition changed back to one of good humor when he retrieved my handbag from the ground.

“It seems the lady is not only a connoisseur of fine jewelry but has a cash flow as well.” He chuckled, holding up the small bundle of bills my father had given me. After putting the bills into the leather satchel looped on his shoulder, he turned to walk away but stopped. “I don’t want to leave you nice people without money for overnight accommodations.” He reached into his pants pocket, pulled out a handful of gold coins, and tossed one to each of us.

“How considerate of you,” I snapped, catching the coin.

The three outlaws scaled the rocky embankment, strapped their bags full of treasure to their saddles, and mounted their horses.

The pinstriped bandit tipped his dude hat to Jim. “Sorry for the inconvenience, and hope we didn’t put you too far off schedule.” He turned to the rest of us. “Thank you all for your contributions. I’m sorry about this, it’s just business.”

Then he looked directly at me, tipped his hat once more, and said, “And thank you for the ring, Miss Antelini.”

Chapter 2

Romano Vineyards Estate
Napa Valley, California
Saturday, October 14, 1893

“**Y**ou bastard! How could you disgrace me like this?” Allegra Romano Carver was proficient at berating her husband. She’d had four years to perfect her skills. “I’m the laughingstock of Napa Valley and have you to thank for it! You made a fool of me!”

Daniel Carver stood silent in the study of their Napa Valley mansion while his wife admonished him. It had taken less than forty-eight hours for the news of Daniel and Nicola’s tryst in the Romano Vineyards wine cave to spread through town and then to the couple’s eighteen-room mansion on a hill overlooking their vineyard.

One of the largest in Napa Valley, the house had been built in 1869 by Daniel’s late father-in-law, Guido Romano, and was a handsome example of Italian craftsmanship, with its rugged exterior stonework, rich interior wood paneling, and imported Venetian stained glass windows. Guido Romano had commissioned artisan craftsmen from his native Italy to create this grand family home—the kind of place Daniel had dreamed

of living in since he was a boy. However, Daniel knew that Allegra felt differently about her childhood home. It had always seemed like a prison to her since her father forced her into the role of official hostess and protégé after her mother's death. But Daniel had no sympathy for her. What did she have to complain about? Having to live with memories of hosting mandatory dinner parties in the elegant hand-painted dining room at age sixteen? Of tea parties in her mother's toil-papered sitting room? Of learning to make wine in the secluded darkness of the winery alongside her father? Life should be so rough.

When her father had died and willed her the mansion and vineyard, Allegra took the family business to unprecedented heights by hiring a new winemaker and marketing Romano Vineyards' wine across the country and throughout Europe. Allegra had grown the family business into a multi-million-dollar operation, and Daniel was perfectly suited to be at her side, helping her run it. She needed someone with finesse to counteract her abrupt manner. She could be brutal. Like right now.

Daniel stood five-foot-eleven in his custom-made cashmere suit, his golden hair beginning to silver at the temples, an unmistakable indication of the misery he had endured as Allegra's husband. The handsome headmaster of Miss Abbot's Academy for Girls ran his fingers through his wavy locks, straightened his floppy bowtie, and shifted his weight from side to side.

Allegra Romano was a uniquely strong woman. Daniel had never encountered one like her before, and there hadn't been any indication of her foul temper during their courtship.

"After all I've given you!" Allegra threw her hands in the air. "It didn't take long for you to settle into my family home and get used to your elevated social status, did it? I pay for the roof over your head, your caviar and imported cigars, your custom-made suits, your holidays abroad." Allegra walked around the desk, coming face-to-face with Daniel, hands balled into fists at her waist. "Do you really think the pitiful salary you make at

your pathetic job would afford you this lifestyle? And that bitch, Nicola Antelini! I told you not to hire her. I knew she'd be trouble. But you wouldn't listen. You *had* to have your way. Now look what's happened. What do you have to say for yourself, Daniel? Daniel? Daniel?"

Allegra's shrieks became distant as Daniel's thoughts drifted to two days earlier in the Romano Vineyards wine cave. He remembered Nicola running toward him, arms outstretched, her petticoats rustling beneath her long skirt.

"I've been waiting nearly half an hour and was worried you might not come," he'd said to her. It had been at least a week since their last rendezvous, and he'd been craving Nicola's ardent embrace, her unchaste kisses, and the way she made him feel like no woman had before. Not only was Nicola physically appealing, with her petite figure, blue eyes, and infectious smile, but she also had a way of making Daniel feel emotionally strong and confident. For all of Nicola's twenty-six years, she didn't look a day over twenty. At forty-six, Daniel knew he was old enough to be her father.

"Hello, my sweet." Daniel wrapped his arms around Nicola's diminutive waist. He pushed his lips deep into her neck and inhaled her warm, alluring scent. He loved her delicate skin and tried not to prick her with his stubby, coarse beard as he ran his moist lips up and down her throat. He groaned softly with desire and felt her go limp in his arms.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes, of course. I've just missed you, that's all." She smiled and looked up at him. On tiptoe, she brought her lips up to his, and he tasted the perfumed, licorice-flavored Sen-Sen on her tongue.

Daniel pressed his lips hard onto hers and ran his hands slowly down her torso. "God, you feel good." He began gently thrusting his pelvis into hers.

"We can't do this here." Nicola pulled away, placing a hand on her chest as if to catch her breath. "Someone might catch us."

“Nonsense. The workers are all in the winery crushing grapes or out in the vineyard picking.” He pulled her gently toward him. “No one’s going to come in here.”

“No, really, Daniel. It’s too risky.”

Daniel hoped she could sense his disappointment as he let go of her and dragged his feet, walking across the dirt floor of the dimly lit cave that snaked through the hillside near the Romano Vineyards winery. A single lantern sat on a table in the center of the cave, softly lighting the room and casting long shadows on the walls, which were lined with hundreds of oak wine barrels resting on their sides. Barrels of Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel, Mourvèdre, Syrah, and Barbera filled the cool, humid cave, which smelled of oak, must, aging wine, and damp earth.

Picking up a long glass pipette from the small table, he held his finger on one end as he dipped the other into a barrel marked Cabernet Sauvignon #281 and drew up a sampling of the wine. He emptied the wine into a glass and offered it to Nicola.

“Taste, my love. It’s almost ready for bottling.”

“Oh, I really shouldn’t. I haven’t eaten much today, and I’m teaching this afternoon. It’ll go straight to my head.”

“I could cancel your classes, and we could stay here all afternoon.” He gave her a knowing smile. “That’s one of the privileges of being headmaster, you know.” Nicola grinned at him. “Come on, just a little,” he said. “You know I don’t like to drink alone.” He handed her the glass, but she didn’t take it.

Daniel didn’t like it when she refused him anything. Most of the time he could manipulate her into doing whatever he wanted. He was extremely good at talking her into going against her will. After all, he was older and therefore wiser, and he wasn’t afraid to tell her so. Nicola had a troubled relationship with her father, and Daniel used it to his advantage. Often.

“Very well, but just a taste.” She took the glass from his hand.

“That’s my girl.” He realized his jaw had tightened, and he allowed his expression to grow soft again.

Nicola took a sip. "This is excellent. Exceptionally good."

"I understand your father is also releasing a Cab this year. Have you tried it?"

"No, not yet. Paulo, our winemaker, says it won't be ready for another couple of months."

"It'll be interesting to see who makes the better wine this year, Romano or Antelini Vineyards. Heaven help me if your father's turns out to be better than Allegra's. There'll be no living with her if it is. She can't stand the thought of your father outdoing her in anything, including that damned lawsuit. She's determined to win judgment against your father, you know."

"Yes, I know. Father gave us an earful about it at dinner last night."

"It's beyond me why she thinks she owns the water rights. Her attorney has explained the law to her a hundred times, but she doesn't think it applies to her. It's frustrating to watch her throw good money away on a bad lawsuit everyone knows she can't win. She has it in for your father, and there's no reasoning with her."

"Believe me. He hates her as much as she hates him."

Daniel dipped the pipette into the barrel several more times and refilled their glasses. "To us." He clinked his glass with Nicola's.

Sitting on stools at the table, Daniel and his lover chatted. When Nicola emptied her glass, he took it from her. "Here, let me refill that for you."

"No, Daniel. I have a class this afternoon." She rose to her feet. "Remember?"

"Oh, come on. Let's enjoy this together. Don't you love me?" Daniel didn't wait for Nicola's response and refilled her glass.

She settled back down on the stool, obligingly sipping the wine and appearing more relaxed. Daniel could see that the wine was having an effect on the 105-pound woman. He refilled their glasses several more times, and soon, beads of perspiration formed

on Nicola's forehead. She stood and removed her coat and the silk scarf from around her neck.

"That's better," she said.

"Keep going." Daniel grinned as he slid off the stool, stepped toward her, cupped his hands around her buttocks, and drew her to him.

"No, we can't." Nicola began to giggle. Daniel did, too, as he unbuttoned her blouse. He couldn't hide his grin when he saw her milky-white breasts bulging from the top of her corset. As he gently kissed them, Nicola moaned softly. Then she gave him a mock seductive look as she took off her blouse, tossing it behind a row of barrels along the wall. They both burst into laughter. He watched as she loosened the buttons on her skirt and petticoats and let them drop to the floor. Daniel offered her his hand as she stepped out of them and stood in nothing but her ecru damask corset, her legs smooth and bare. She lifted her arms, closed her eyes, tilted her head back, and slowly twirled in place.

"My God, Daniel, I feel like I could float away. Don't you?"

Daniel did not answer.

"Daniel, don't you feel like you could just float away?" She continued to twirl.

Daniel remained silent.

"Daniel? Daniel?"

Nicola stopped and opened her eyes, appearing to take a moment to focus.

As Daniel watched her from the cave entrance, he shook his head. He was surrounded by four men. Three were wine distributors and the fourth, Alberto, Romano Vineyards' winemaker, who had just led the men on a tour of the vineyards and brought them into the cave to sample wine.

"Oh my God!" Reaching down, Nicola picked up her skirt and tried to cover herself. She darted to her discarded blouse but couldn't reach it because it had wedged itself between the

barrels and the wall. Helpless, she crouched behind a barrel. In her drunken stupor, she lost her balance and toppled.

Daniel quickly ushered the men out of the cave. When they stepped into the glaring sunlight, he turned to them.

“Honestly, I can’t believe that woman. She scheduled an appointment to discuss a field trip to Romano Vineyards for her students, and when she arrived, she proceeded to get drunk and tried to seduce me. What a disgrace she is to the academy. I’ll deal with her when I get back to my office.”

When the distributors left, Daniel pulled Alberto aside and told him not to breathe a word about what had happened to anyone.

“Daniel, *DANIEL!*” Allegra shrieked. “Have you heard *anything* I’ve said?”

Daniel snapped out of his daze and refocused on his wife. “Yes, dear. I don’t know how this happened.”

Allegra abruptly turned her back and crossed the room. Her stocky figure was silhouetted against the sunlight streaming through the fan-shaped window, an ominous premonition. Daniel didn’t know if his uneasy feeling was his imagination or a lingering effect from all the wine he’d had in the cave two days earlier, along with the half bottle of whiskey the day before in an attempt to calm his nerves from worry that Allegra might find out what had happened. All he knew was that Allegra was the angriest she had been with him for any of his indiscretions.

As Allegra moved away from the window, her harsh features emerged from shadow. Ten years Daniel’s senior, Allegra resembled her late mother with her round, protruding eyes, pronounced nose, and sooty black hair tightly slicked into a bun at the nape of her neck. Allegra had been besotted with Daniel during their courtship. He had made her feel beautiful and desirable. It was the first time a man had shown a romantic interest in the uncomely woman. The handsome headmaster had easily won her hand and fortune.

“Miss Antelini lured me to the cave under false pretenses,” Daniel lied. “I don’t know what got into her. She began acting inappropriately as soon as we got there. When she began unbuttoning—”

“I don’t need to hear the details!” Allegra slammed her hand on the desk, rattling the Tiffany lamp’s glass shade.

Daniel was all too familiar with the hard-edged business-woman demeanor Allegra slipped into every time she found out about another one of his dalliances. He knew it was just a cover for the pain she felt whenever he strayed from their bed, which was becoming more frequent as time went on. He had the advantage, however, of knowing that she loved him and was afraid of waking up one morning and finding him gone for good, so he didn’t put much stock into her threats. Until now. This time it was different.

“Of course, dear, I’m sorry. Well . . . when she started acting strangely, I implored her to stop, but she wouldn’t listen. *You* are the love of my life, Allegra, you know that.” He spread his hands wide, trying his best to placate his wife. “I did nothing to encourage this.”

“You’ll have to do better than that,” Allegra said. “You’ve not only disgraced me but also my family’s name. We’ll be shunned socially and in our business as well.” She eased herself into an overstuffed chair, cupping her face in her hands. “Who knows how many orders will be canceled because of this? Our business is based on integrity and family honor, and you’ve destroyed that. And the fallout from this scandal will be even worse because of the economy. The stock market is down, people are out of work, and what little money they have I can assure you won’t be spent on wine. You don’t pay much attention to what’s going on in the world around you, do you, Daniel? You couldn’t have picked a worse time to do this. And with my competitor’s daughter, no less.”

“I don’t know what else I can do, Allegra.”

“You can get rid of her. That’s what you can do.” She surged to her feet and walked back to the desk. Planting both hands on the blotter, she leaned forward, her eyes glowering. “Get rid of that whore. I don’t ever want to lay eyes on her again. And after you do, hand in your resignation at Miss Abbot’s and come work here at the winery with me. I want you where I can keep an eye on you. Do you understand?”

“But you can’t mean that, Allegra. I love my work at the academy.”

“I know what you love about the academy, and it’s not your work.” She smirked.

“How can you say that?”

“Because it’s true. I see the way you ogle those girls. Might I remind you of the Sarah Harper scandal? Luckily, I bailed you out of that one before her parents could take action. You never learn, do you, Daniel?”

“There’s no need to terminate Miss Antelini. She’s already on her way to San Luis Obispo and then on to Los Angeles. Her father threw her out.”

“Good. She deserves it. For once, Savino Antelini showed good sense. But I didn’t mean for you to *terminate* her—I meant for you to get *rid* of her. Do you understand me?”

“Allegra, you can’t be serious!”

“I am. *Damn* serious. It isn’t enough that she won’t be causing trouble around here anymore. I want to teach her father a lesson for all he’s put me through. For all the torment this damned lawsuit’s caused.” The sharp angles of her face became fierce. “I despise Savino Antelini and want him to suffer. So, make sure word gets back to him that his precious daughter is dead.”

“Good God. Do you realize what you’re actually saying?”

When Allegra had inherited Romano Vineyards from her father, she’d also inherited a decades-long water dispute with Savino Antelini, Nicola’s father and the owner of the neighboring winery, Antelini Vineyards. Allegra had taken the dispute a step

further than her father by hiring a San Francisco lawyer and suing Savino. She had stopped at nothing—*nothing*—to retaliate against him and to sustain her reputation as California’s premier vintner.

“Yes, I’m well aware of what I’m saying. No one takes a stand against Allegra Romano without paying a heavy price. I didn’t toil long hours in the winery alongside my father to become second best. And I’m especially not going to let Savino Antelini’s disreputable daughter make a fool out of me and steal my husband. They *both* have to pay.”

“But I can’t—”

“Yes, you can. Remember, Daniel, I know who you are and what you’re capable of doing.” The two exchanged a silent message as Allegra lowered her voice to a conspiratorial tone and her eyes became moist. “Nicola Antelini made a fool of me, and I want her and her reprehensible father to pay for it. Now”—she paused calmly and coldly, smoothing the collar of her dress with trembling hands—“I need to get back to the harvest. You’ve kept me long enough.”

Allegra turned and stormed out of the room.