



A NOVEL BASED ON THE LIFE OF
ERNEST GALLO

HARVESTING THE AMERICAN DREAM

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THE
MENTORIS
PROJECT

Prologue

“**D**on't worry about me. I just want you boys to get along and take care of each other.”

The words ricocheted against the walls of twenty-four-year-old Ernest Gallo's skull. Just as he seemed to grasp their import, they would scuttle away from any hope of understanding. They were among his mother's last, uttered just the day before to his brother, Julio.

As Ernest drove south through California's Central Valley to Fresno, he tried to brace himself for the misery that awaited him. To think that Julio had driven this road twenty-four hours ago in the same Model T flatbed to bring their younger brother, Joe, back to Modesto for the summer. How could it be that their lives had changed so tragically with one rotation of the earth, while for others it was just another Wednesday?

Ernest berated himself. He had been living so far in the future that he had failed the present. He had missed all the warning signs. While his head had been in cerulean skies, the barometer had been dropping around him, too low to ever recover. For the last few weeks, any free time he had after tending his father's vineyards had been spent driving the dusty roads of the San Joa-

quin Valley. Were Father to question his motives, Ernest would have said he was checking in with their growers, estimating harvest times to anticipate their shipping needs in the fall. But in truth, Ernest had been interviewing old-time vintners and trying to learn as much as he could about how to make wine. And while he had slept, dreaming of barrels brimming with rich red nectar, a tempest had swept in.

After last year's disastrous grape crop, this year's was coming in strong. In fact, Ernest had been thinning the Alicante Bouschet vines when Julio's wife had come hurrying out to the vineyard. As soon as he had seen her expression he had known something was terribly wrong.

"Ernest, there's a reporter from the *Bee* on the phone. You need to come in."

Ernest hadn't been able to answer—let alone comprehend—the questions from the newspaper reporter that had spilled from the phone. He stared at the dirty field boots he hadn't thought to take off before coming into the kitchen. He was transfixed by the cracks that spider-webbed across the worn leather. The shiny black receiver in his grip was like an anchor pulling him under. One by one he looked into the eyes of his family standing mute around him: his wife, Amelia; his brother, Julio, and his wife, Aileen; and thirteen-year-old Joe. None of them could save him. It would be up to *him* to save *them*.

The next couple of hours went by in a blur. He must have cleaned up before he left the farm. Though there was some dirt under his fingernails, his hands were cleaner than they should have been after a day in the vineyard. The vibrations from the steering wheel rattled his body as he pushed the truck toward its top speed of 45 mph. Though he was certainly in no hurry to get

to Fresno, Ernest couldn't seem to keep the weight of his foot off the pedal. He prayed for guidance, strength, and wisdom.

Ernest recognized the orchards and pastures that lined the route. He must be near Merced. Halfway there. He looked down at his watch. When he returned his attention back to the road, he jumped in surprise. Though the sky had been perfect and blue all day, a black cloud had suddenly filled his windshield. He instinctively slammed on the brakes and veered to the road's shoulder. By the time the locked wheels skidded to a stop, the cloud was gone. He hung his head, squeezed his eyes shut, and opened them to a bloodbath. The truck's windshield was a splatter of clear, golden yellow, and red stains. The black cloud had been a swarm of flies, the most populous inhabitants of the Central Valley. Ernest sighed, reached for an old flour sack he kept on the floor, and stepped on the running board to clean up the mess.

Chapter One

JUICE

After making sure his wife was settled, Battista Bianco placed his hands under his grandson's armpits and propelled him into the air onto the wagon's flat bench. He then climbed up next to his wife and handed the five-year-old the worn reins. "Ernest, I need you to drive today," he said. "You have magic way with this stubborn mare. She no listen to old men like me, Nino."

Battista pulled his pipe out of his pocket, stuck it in the side of his mouth, and began his practiced routine. Ernest was eager to hear one of his grandfather's stories, but knew he'd have to wait for his *nonno* to finish his ritual. As Nonno tapped his pipe against the side of his boot, he reached back into his pocket and pulled out his leather pouch. He carefully sprinkled a pinch of tobacco into the bowl of the pipe and pressed it down with his thick thumb. He did this two more times before gingerly holding a lit match over the bowl. When his cheeks hollowed, the flame lowered to the bowl. A few more puffs and a curtain of satisfaction fell over the old Italian's sunbaked face.

Some Sundays they would go to mass early so they could bring the wine to Father Michael. Battista would usually tell his

grandson stories during the dusty ride. Ernest had heard most of them before, but he didn't mind. He had his favorites.

"Nonno, tell me the story about the pirates and the sea monster."

"Ah, are you sure? It's not too scary?"

"No," Ernest boasted. "You know I'm big now. I'm not scared."

Though he spoke English, Ernest understood his grandparents' native Piedmontese dialect and knew the story his nonno was about to tell by heart.

"Well, Nino, you know I wanted to make wine like my father and *my* nonno. Your mama and her sisters were little girls and Uncle Walter was the same age you are now. My cousins had come to California and wrote home about how much it was like Asti. I told your *nonna*, 'Ginnie, I'm going to go to buy a vineyard in California. They're cheap there and I'll never be able to afford the land here. I will send you money so you can join me. The children can stay with our parents. When I have the money, they can come join us—'"

"Nonno, get to the part about the pirates and the sea monsters. *Per favoreeee*," Ernest begged. Sometimes it took Nonno so long to get to the good part.

Nonno took a long draw on his pipe and noticed Ernest had dropped the reins. He picked them up and handed them back to the boy. "Ernest, you must hold tight."

"I know, Nonno. I'm sorry."

"So where was I? Yes. My mama cried. So many young people from our village had gone to America. Not many came back. Only the ones who were too sick. They never even got a peek at Lady Liberty before they were sent right back where they came from. But I was Battista Bianco! I was strong and healthy. I took

the train to Genoa to get the boat. It was the biggest machine I had ever seen. The SS *Werra*. Bigger than my whole village. There were so many people. Young men like me. Mothers. Children. Someone even tried to bring a chicken on the ship. Can you imagine? A chicken crossing the Atlantic Ocean? Bah.

“We had been on the sea for three days when a young hand came down below deck. He couldn’t have been more than—”

“Thirteen. Right, Nonno? He was thirteen,” Ernest interjected.

“Ernest! You must respect your elders. It’s not polite to interrupt,” Nonna gently reminded.

“Your nonna’s right, Nino. As I was saying ... he couldn’t have been more than thirteen. I was asleep when my new friend, Antonio, poked me awake. ‘Battista, wake up. They’re looking for you.’ I stood up and carefully stepped over all the people in my way. I didn’t want to step on anybody! So many sleeping bodies.

“‘Are you Battista Bianco?’ the boy asked me.

“I said, ‘*Sì*.’”

“‘*Signore*, Captain Pohle needs to see you immediately,’ he said. I couldn’t imagine why the captain would want to speak with me, but I followed the young lad up the stairs. The captain was a big man and he looked at me and said, ‘*Signore Bianco?* I understand you have brought treasure onto my ship. Now we have pirates onboard and they want to speak to you.’”

“‘*Mio Dio*. Pirates?’ I said. ‘And they want *my* treasure? Let me see these scoundrels.’ The captain led me into his private chamber where there were two savage-looking knaves waiting for me. One had a patch over his eye and the other had only one leg. And oh, how they smelled!”

Nonno squeezed his nose with his fingers and Ernest and his grandmother both giggled.

“So I tell these pirates to follow me. I will go get my treasure,” Nonno continued. “We walk across the deck where all the fancy people are and I lead the pirates to the rail. You see, Ernest, I had a plan. That afternoon the water was still. Like glass. And the sun—it was a golden orange. And you could see its reflection on the water. I said to the pirates, ‘Why do you want my treasure when there are greater riches right here in the sea?’

“The fellow with the patch looked to where I pointed and his one eye squinted with greed. The sun played a trick on him and he thought there was gold under the water. He jumped off the ship and his stupid friend followed him. And my treasure was safe.”

“Your cuttings, right, Nonno?”

“Smart boy. You remember. Yes. The wine we are bringing to Father Michael came from the vines that grew from those Asti cuttings. Our family in Italy drinks the same wine.” And then he added with a wink, “But mine is better.”

“Now, the part about the sea monster,” Ernest urged.

“Another time, Nino. There’s the church. I’ll join you and Nonna inside after I see Father Michael.”

Nonna took her grandson’s hand and led him to the wrought iron stand of votive candles inside the small narthex. She reached into her purse and gave him a penny for the collection box. She then struck a wooden match, which Ernest solemnly and carefully accepted. He stepped on tippy toes and gingerly lit the highest candle he could reach and hurriedly puffed the match out before the flame could reach his fingers. He watched his grandmother give the sign of the cross and copied her motions.

After Nonna said hello to a few of her friends, they made their way to their usual pew and waited for Mass to begin.

“Sssshhh, Nino. Be still,” Virginia Bianco whispered in her grandson’s ear. The boy had skinned his knees the week before. He had been teaching cousin Stella the steps to “Giro Giro Tondo” when his feet got tangled and he fell on the rocky soil. Through the scabs Ernest could feel every groove of the pine plank under his knees. He shifted his weight from side to side, taking a bit of the pressure off one knee at a time, but any relief he felt was short-lived.

Ernest tugged on the skirts of his grandmother’s ankle-length dress. “But Nonna ...”

“No, Ernest. *Silenzio.*”

He wrinkled his nose and twisted his mouth. He caught a small smile on his grandmother’s face as she turned away from him. Even when she was stern, Ernest felt the warmth of her love. He wondered if sometimes she was just pretending to be cross.

Nonno joined them and the priest began to talk. Ernest shifted his gaze to the streaks of blue and gold reflected on the floor. He traced the source to the sunlight streaming through the window to his right. From the glass, the Madonna gazed down at the babe in her arms. Ernest was captivated by the honey-colored circles that arched over the tops of their heads. He wondered if they were attached and if Mary had to take her baby’s off before she put him to bed. In the picture at Nonna and Nonno’s, they had a soft glow, but these looked heavy and awkward. Ernest continued to examine the window until his thoughts were interrupted by the tinkling of a small bell.

This was his favorite part. Father Michael was about to turn Nonno’s wine into Jesus’s blood. He didn’t understand why any-

one would want to drink someone's blood, even God's, but he knew it was a miracle. Ernest could feel a thumping inside his ears every Sunday at this part of the Mass. He forgot all about the pain in his knees, and he straightened his spine and pulled his shoulders down as he looked up at the gold chalice raised over the priest's head. Ernest snuck a peek at his grandfather. If it weren't for him, there would be no wine and no miracle.

Ernest didn't really understand why he had been sent down to Hanford, California, in 1910 to live with his nonna and nonno. He was one year old at the time and his newborn brother, Julio, had stayed in Oakland, a few hours away, with their mother and father. Nonna said it was because his mother worked too hard cleaning and cooking three meals a day for all the *pensioners* at his father's boardinghouse. Susie couldn't possibly manage all that *and* care for a new baby with a toddler underfoot. But when his parents came to visit, his father would say, "Don't ask so many questions."

Almost eighty miles south of the state's exact center, the Biancos' farm was known to all in the quiet agricultural community. The veil of dust that fomented along the driveway signaling a visitor's arrival hardly had time to settle before its next disturbance. Sundays were the busiest, when family and friends came over right after Mass. Nonna served her famous ravioli and each family would bring something to share: bread, sausages, cheese, and fruit. Of course, Nonno provided the wine. Most people brought gallon-size earthen jugs and gave Nonno five cents to fill them up straight from one of the barrels in his basement. People were always coming to buy wine. Some were shepherds from foreign lands. Ernest didn't understand their funny words and it seemed that Nonno didn't, either, but their empty jugs

and the nickels in their outstretched hands said everything that needed to be said.

When the sun rose to cooler days, an entirely new crowd emerged from the dust cloud that hung over the driveway. Some faces were familiar, but each year there would be new ones. They had come to help Nonno with the harvest and crush. Battista's vineyards stretched across Hanford. He grew different kinds of grapes and each vineyard ripened in its own time. Family, friends, and hired hands filled wooden lug boxes with sun-sweetened handpicked clusters. The crates were carried to wagons and unloaded at the shed behind the white shingled farmhouse.

Father Michael came to bless the first crush of the season. Ernest, cousin Stella, and the other barefoot children were placed into a big tub of rich purple fruit where they jumped and danced, infused by the day's holiday-like atmosphere. Without fail, there would be one child who stepped on a stem and cried for his mother to lift him out of the goo. But Ernest loved the squishy feeling between his toes, the sticky sweet smell in the air, and the excitement that came with each year's jubilee.

As the children did their part, the bulk of the grapes were crushed next to the shed in a machine manned by two men. One poured the fruit into the hopper while the other turned a bank vault-style wheel to spin two metal shafts that squeezed the clusters of grapes. A bucket underneath collected the thick mash of juice, pulp, skins, and stems that spilled from the machine. The mixture was then poured into sixty-gallon barrels inside the shed to ferment for a week or so.

One September afternoon in 1914, Ernest was bored. The fervor of the harvest had subsided, and Nonno, Uncle Walter, Aunt Lydia, and Stella had all gone into town on errands. Nonna had fallen asleep in her chair while knitting, and Ernest couldn't

think of anything to do. He heard muffled voices in the backyard and went outside to investigate. Two of Nonno's helpers were in the backyard shed pressing the wine—the big fat man and the one with the scar on his arm. Ernest watched attentively. They dipped a bucket into one of the big fermenting tanks and emptied the smelly mixture into the press. The device looked like a tiny wooden barrel, except maybe the man who made it hadn't done such a good job. There were gaps between the planks and liquid was coming out the sides. But the men didn't seem worried.

The big fat man covered the press with a round wooden lid. The other man attached a long metal handle and started winching it back and forth. More and more juice spilled out of the sides and from a groove in front where the milky purple nectar poured into another bucket. When the bucket was full, one of the men would pour it into a barrel or one of Nonno's big baskets that had a glass jug inside.

"Can I have a turn?" Ernest asked the man with the scar.

"I don't know. This is hard work . . . let me see your muscles."

Ernest pushed up his shirtsleeve and flexed his bicep with all his might. His face turned red as he held his breath.

The big man laughed, "Why, Gianni, I think he's stronger than you."

Gianni stacked a couple of lug boxes on top of each other to give the little boy a higher perch. It was harder to pull the handle than Ernest had expected. While he pushed all his weight against the metal bar, the two men held a tin cup under the press and drank some of the fresh juice. The wooden lid sunk into the growing cake of dross with each pull or push, and soon Gianni had to put some wooden blocks between the lid and the mechanism to keep the pressure on the mash of grapes.

“Boy oh boy, I need a break,” the five-year-old exhaled after a few minutes. Ernest jumped off his perch and the men resumed their work. His brown hair was stuck to his forehead and he was mighty thirsty. He picked up the tin cup and gulped down the sweet juice as he had seen the men do. The men laughed.

Pushing the press wasn't as much fun as it had looked, but Ernest stayed and rolled empty barrels and casks to the men as they continued their work. But that was difficult, too. Ernest took another drink of juice. The men laughed even louder.

Enjoying the attention, Ernest put a farm basket on his head and put on a show. He placed his hands on his hips as he danced, spun, and jumped in circles. He felt a warmth rush through his body and an energizing tingle course through his limbs.

“I'm a little old woman,” he screeched. “I'm a donkey,” he brayed. “Watch me kick my legs.” He gave the performance of his life.

Suddenly the walls of the shed felt like they were closing in on him. He had to get outside. There, he ran faster than he had ever run in his life. He sprang up from one foot and hung in the air forever before his other foot hit the ground. He felt like he was flying.

When Ernest woke up, he slammed his eyes closed as fast as he could. It was dark and he couldn't tell where he was. But all the shadowed shapes around him were spinning faster than anything could possibly move. He cautiously opened one eye and saw that the sky outside the window was darker than the pressed grapes. He raised his other eyelid and grandmother's bed started to twirl. He squeezed his eyes closed again and began to cry.

“Hush, Nino, everything will be good,” came Nonna's soothing voice.

“Nonna, I'm dying,” Ernest squeaked.

“No, Nino. You will be okay. Silly boy, you had too much wine.”

“No, Nonna. I didn’t drink any wine. I’m dying.” Ernest stifled a sob.

“Ernest, when the grapes are in Nonno’s shed, they turn into wine. But don’t worry. Keep your eyes closed and go back to sleep.” Grandmother Bianco looked into her grandson’s scared brown eyes and placed a damp cloth on his brow. She sang softly.

*Fa la ninna, fa la nanna
Nella braccia della Mama
Fa la ninna bel bambin,
Fa la nanna bambin bel,
Fa la ninna, fal la nanna
Nella braccia della Mama*

“But Nonna, why can’t you come, too?”

“What would I do in the big city? And who would cook for Nonno? And what about the chickens? You know I’m the one who feeds them every day,” Grandmother soothed.

“Why, they can come, too! It would make Mama so happy to have you with us,” Ernest rebuffed.

Virginia Bianco was breaking into a million pieces on the inside, but she remained steady for her grandson. Her daughter and no-good son-in-law were on their way to collect him. Battista’s lungs were in poor health again and it was time to try a different climate. In any case, it was certainly time for Ernest to live with his mama and papa. Julio was five already and the brothers were practically strangers. Maybe Giuseppe had changed like Assunta had assured them. Oh, how could her daughter have made such a poor choice? And then for her

younger sister, Celia, to go ahead and marry Giuseppe's brother Michaelo? Such foolish girls!

Ernest knew he belonged with his mama and papa, and he was excited to live in the city and go to school to become smart. But he couldn't remember a time when Nonna and Nonno hadn't taken care of him. He wondered if Mama knew how to make ravioli and if Papa knew any good stories. He wondered what it would be like to have a little brother. He had spent time with Julio during holidays, but only for a few days at a time. He seemed okay and they did have fun playing together. But one thing he knew for sure: He needed to make it clear right away that Julio knew who was in charge. Julio was the baby. Ernest was big. His throat ached and he tried to wipe away the warm tears he felt on his cheek before Nonna could see them. Big boys didn't cry.

Nonna knelt down to her grandson's height and pulled him against her bosom. "Nino, remember what I always say: *Avanti e coraggio. Il Signore chudera la porta ma apre un altro.* Let's go ahead with courage. When God closes one door, He opens another."

Chapter Two

HARD KNOCKS

“I don’t wanna tell him. You tell him,” Ernest said emphatically. “Uh-uh. I told him last time. It’s your turn,” Julio argued.

Ernest thought for a minute before speaking again. “Um, okay, but here’s the deal. I’ll tell him. But you have to feed the cows for two weeks.”

“No way. *Two weeks?* That’s not fair. One week,” Julio countered.

“Okay, one week.” Ernest sighed dramatically for Julio’s benefit. He wanted Julio to feel like he had conceded while his plan all along had been to agree to one week. He stifled a small smile, not wanting to hurt Julio’s pride or seem like a bully. Plus, one week was fair considering what he was about to do.

Ernest twisted around to look back at the crooked line the plow had etched along the surface of the hardpan. The furrow certainly wasn’t deep enough for the potatoes his father planned to grow. He pushed down on the lever to lift the plowshare and jumped down to the dirt. It had been a long summer. His arms ached and his legs were weak from standing all day. He hadn’t been able to sit down as his feet didn’t reach the floor of the plow. He was only able to control the four-mule team when he stood.

He walked around the lathered, huffing animals to his brother. Each boy spit in his right palm before sealing the deal with a handshake. Julio held the lead mule's halter while his brother headed for the barn. Ernest turned back once and was struck by the expanse of the brown field. It stretched as far as he could see, no matter which direction he looked. It seemed he and Julio had little to show for their last three weeks of labor.

Father had bought the farm in Antioch, California, six months ago, in the spring of 1917. Ernest remembered the dark mood leading up to the move. One night after Father had closed his Oakland saloon for the evening, Ernest and Julio had been awakened by his shouts breaking through their bedroom floorboards like the harsh light of an oncoming train. "The Drys are going to ruin this country! You watch!" Ernest was accustomed to his father's temper, but this outburst was lasting longer than most. He heard Mama quietly trying to soften Father's mood. It would be still for a few moments and Ernest would hold his breath, praying it was over. But then the shouting would begin again. The ugly insults his father hurled at his mother slapped at the boy's ears. Chairs scraped against the floor below and he heard Mama cry out. Ernest tucked the pillow around his head and held it in place with the crook of his right arm. He reached his left arm over to Julio's twin bed and found his brother's waiting hand, and in it, the comfort and assurance he needed to fall back to sleep.

The next morning, Ernest noticed everything took Mama twice as long as usual—pouring their milk, buttering their bread, putting the lunches together for school. She moved like one of those hypnotized people at the carnny. "Boys," she said, "your father is selling the *pensione*. The government won't let anyone sell wine or alcohol anymore. He found a nice farm not far from

here. One hundred and twenty acres. You'll still be able to see your cousins. We can grow all our own food and you will have a lot of exploring to do. Imagine the games of hide-and-seek you can have. And I won't have to cook and clean for all these strangers anymore. It will just be the four of us. Won't that be nice?"

But so far, Antioch had been anything but "nice." Now, another beam on the plow had snapped in two. That was the third one in as many weeks and Father had been apoplectic about the first. As Ernest trudged to the barn to inform his father, he rehearsed a speech he knew he would never deliver. "*Papa, no one else is plowing their fields right now. The ground is too hard and the draught horses we used last time only made the soil worse. I'm only eight and Julio's only seven. We're doing our best. Please don't be mad at us.*" Ernest willed these disrespectful and dangerous thoughts out of his head. A swift whipping would come if Father ever read his mind or smelled a whiff of disrespect. Best he just tell Father quickly. Get it over with and endure the hollering and whatever punishment came with it.

"Father?"

"What is it now?" Father was perched on a bale of straw, pencil in hand, carefully examining the W. F. Pitts seed catalog. Father didn't speak English, let alone read it. Ernest knew *he* could read most of the words, but didn't dare offer to help. He knew better than to insult his father. If Father wanted his help, he would ask for it. The immigrant's eyes remained fixed on the small, tight words while his young son stood by his side reaching deep within for courage and, at the same time, steeling himself for the worst.

"Another beam broke," Ernest stated. The fewer words, he'd learned, the better.

“*È la vita.* That’s life,” his father answered flatly. “Wipe down the mules and feed all the animals before your mother has dinner ready. And make sure the sheep have water. Tomorrow you will start cutting the Thompsons in the vineyard and Julio will weed between the rows. I need them to be ready to graft the Zinfandels and Alicantes in the spring.”

“Yes, Father.” Ernest’s chest heaved in relief. That was the rub with Father. You never knew what you were going to get.

Born Giuseppe Gallo in 1882, Ernest’s father now went by the Americanized version of his name: Joe. He had arrived in Oakland just in time for the big earthquake of 1906. Within a year Joe had saved enough money to buy a horse and small wagon. He spent three days of each week making trips to local wine-makers. He left before the sun rose and returned to the city at nightfall with eight barrels of homemade wine. He sold the wine along the side of the city’s cobblestoned streets, mostly to immigrants from Northern Italy like himself. The hearty red wine made by their fellow countrymen tasted like home. When the last drop had fallen into the last buyer’s jug, he returned to the wineries to refill his barrels. This was how he met his wife, Susie, for he used to buy wine from her father, Battista Bianco.

Joe had saved his money and, with his younger brother Mike’s help, bought an Oakland boardinghouse with a first-floor saloon that catered to the Bay Area’s influx of Northern Italians. Though Susie had worked tirelessly to keep the boardinghouse clean and the *pensioners* well fed, most of their income had come from the five-gallon kegs of wine that stood on the downstairs bar. However, in Joe’s opinion, this new country had some *pazzo*, or crazy, ideas about wine and liquor. Somehow politicians

thought they could temper alcoholism through government-induced temperance. With the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment, prohibiting the sale of alcohol, and the onset of Prohibition, Joe needed to find a new way to support his family. While his brother Mike was laying the foundation for an illicit future, Joe was determined to obey the law of the land no matter how ridiculous he thought it to be.

Joe had always enjoyed his forays to the local wineries. The agrarian lifestyle seemed honest and reminded him of home. The farmers he knew were simple people, maybe even simpleminded. If they could farm successfully, surely he could, too. How hard could it possibly be? If he could find some affordable land near Oakland, he could come to town and sell produce just like he had sold wine years before.

The Antioch property had satisfied the top three requirements on Joe's wish list: the price was right; it was close to Oakland; and the land was already productive—vineyards of Thompson seedless grapes covered a third of the land. Thompsons grew well in the region and were a dependable, all-purpose variety. They were the standard table grape, but could be made into both raisins and wine.

For although the *sale* of wine was forbidden under the Constitution's new amendment, its *manufacture* wasn't. At least, not exactly. Wineries could still make medicinal and sacramental wine, but more importantly, the head of each household in the country could make 200 gallons a year for his family's personal use. Thousands of Northern Italian immigrants had moved into the Bay Area and now they would be making their own wine. It would be breeze for Joe to sell any grapes he grew.

The new amendment, however, had opened up an even bigger market for grapes—a national one. Families throughout the

country cleared space in their basements for “Papa’s new hobby” and Papa needed grapes. Most of the country’s wine drinkers were French, Italian, and German immigrants who lived in the Midwest and on the east coast. For decades locomotives had towed tank cars filled with California wine to the east. But now they delivered refrigerated cars with a much more fragile cargo: grapes. The journey was unforgiving, and growers, shippers, and home winemakers quickly came to prefer Alicante Bouschet grapes over Thompsons.

The thick skins of the Alicantes kept them from breaking during transit and decreased the subsequent mold. Alicantes also made the type of rich, deep red wine preferred by immigrants. The grape was so sturdy it could be pressed multiple times. With some added water and sugar, a ton of Alicantes could produce 700 gallons of wine, significantly more than the 150 gallons most other varieties yielded. Joe saw the opportunity and decided to graft Alicante cuttings onto his Thompsons’ rootstocks.

But, as his eldest son Ernest soon concluded, Joe Gallo knew nothing about farming. And he didn’t have the aptitude, the instinct, or the patience for it. He was like King Midas, but instead of turning everything into gold, everything he touched either withered and died or remained dormant in the ground. The vegetables that persevered in spite of all the indignities they suffered were half the size and half as sweet or flavorful as they should be. Susie barely had enough tomatoes and garlic to feed and can for her own family. Selling anything in Oakland was out of the question.

Ernest and Julio never did play hide-and-seek on the family’s new farm. Their chores knew no end, no matter the day of the week or the season. But the brothers were in it together and rarely complained. What good would it do? There were always

animals to feed and vineyards to tend. Complaining wouldn't change that. Nor would it mollify Father's endless expectations and demands.

Unlike most of Ernest's classmates—many of them farmers' sons, too—Ernest was grateful when school resumed in the fall. While some of the kids had their summer vacations, Ernest had been working hard on the farm. But now he had recess. Twice a day even! He could sit most of the day and was the best in his class at math. He even appreciated when Miss Peterson corrected some of his Italian ways and helped him become more American. Even though he was born in California, he sometimes felt more Italian than American.

One spring day during his last year of elementary school, the teacher dismissed them early. Ernest had forgotten it was a half day. He met Julio outside his classroom as per their unspoken routine. As they were about to leave the building, they passed a group of Julio's friends. One of them was carrying a basketball.

"Hey Julio, why don't you and your brother come with us?" one of them invited.

"Thanks, I wish I could, but I need to get home," Julio shrugged.

The Gallo brothers turned right at the end of the path and dutifully headed for their never-satisfied fields. They were about halfway home when Ernest suddenly stopped.

"Julio! What's wrong with us? We need to live, brother!" He pivoted in front of Julio and put both hands on his shoulders. He turned his younger brother 180 degrees, and with his arms outstretched, gently nudged his brother back toward school.

"Ernest, what are you doing?"

"Not what *I'm* doing. What *we're* doing. *I* didn't know it was a half day. *You* didn't know it was a half day. And more

importantly, *Father* doesn't know it's a half day. Let's have some fun for once."

"Um ... I don't know. We've got so much to do. If Father found out, he'd kill us," Julio argued. "There's no wind today. He'll probably want us to sulfur the vines some more."

"He'll never find out. We'll make sure to get home at the usual time and we'll still get all our chores done." Ernest looked into his brother's bloodshot eyes and imagined his must be just as red. He had told concerned teachers that he was suffering from seasonal hay fever, not wanting to admit that he had been in the field from three until seven in the morning sprinkling sulfur on the grapevines to prevent mildew. The yellow powder made his eyes itch and sting like nobody's business.

"But—"

"Come on, Julio, You know I'm right ... and your eyes need a break. Mine do, too," Ernest appealed.

His logic was hard to refute.

"Alright," Julio agreed. "Last one there's a rotten egg!"

He took off running and Ernest gamely followed, though he knew he had no chance of catching up. Julio was arguably the more athletic of the two.

When they got to the playground, none of Julio's friends were there. Some older boys were playing basketball. The middle school must have been released early, too. Undeterred, Julio approached the boys to see if they could join their game.

"Hey, aren't you Julio? You go to school with my sister," one of the boys said.

"Don't you mean *Hooo-lio*?" asked the one with the slicked-back blond hair. "*Hooo-lio*, are you a dago or a beaner?"

“It’s Julio. Like July. And I don’t know what a ‘dago’ or ‘beaner’ is, so I don’t know if I’m either,” the fifth grader innocently responded.

A rage fell over Ernest and suppressed all his senses like a thick woolen blanket when he registered the slur to his brother. This rowdy had just insulted his brother, his family, his people. Seeing nothing but the entitled face below the slicked-back blond hair, Ernest suddenly felt his feet propel him forward before Julio had even finished his last sentence. Without any deliberation or awareness, Ernest sprung up and quickly jabbed the bully in the nose. Though Ernest was shorter by a full head, he enjoyed the element of surprise. He grabbed Julio by the collar.

“Quick! Run!”

The boys gathered their books without missing a stride and rounded the corner of the Queen Anne schoolhouse ... straight into Joe Gallo.

“Just what I thought! How dare you! How dare you take advantage of me,” Father growled between clenched teeth. He grabbed each boy by the ear and dragged them to his waiting truck.

Julio started to cry, but Ernest remained stoic. It was all his fault. How could Father have known? Ernest looked up at the red-faced Italian and saw a little dab of shaving cream in the hollow of his ear. He must have been at the barbershop that was right across the street from the drugstore. A lot of the school kids had probably gone there to buy candy to celebrate their unexpected liberation. Father must have put it together that school had been dismissed early. He’d probably gone to look for his sons after returning home to discover their insubordination.

“Father, it’s all my fault,” Ernest admitted. “Julio wanted to go straight home, but I made him stay.”

“Exactly, Ernest. It *is* all your fault. You are the big brother and I expect more from you. What kind of example are you? And what of your baby brother, Joseph? Is this the kind of behavior you will teach him, too?”

Joe stooped down so he could look Ernest straight in the eye and seethed, “I’m ashamed you bear my name. You’re not worthy.” With that, he stood up and spit on the ground. The thick wad landed on Ernest’s left shoe. “Remember those long pants I promised you for your graduation? No? Neither do I.”

Ernest took a quick look around to make sure none of his classmates were nearby, but thankfully, they were alone. Graduating in his old, worn knickers would be humiliation enough. He took a long look at the belt around Father’s waist. Maybe by staring it down he would become its master, weakening its power so it would hurt less later on. Then, as if Mother Nature was in on Father’s mood, the sky darkened and cold, fat raindrops began to fall.

By the time they got home it was pouring. Blinded by the tumult of his guilt and shame and his father’s unfairness, Ernest hadn’t noticed the mound of old rubber tires that filled the truck bed. He started walking toward the shabby house. Finding a comfortable home for his family clearly hadn’t been one of Father’s priorities when leaving Oakland.

“Whoa, boy! Where do you think you’re going? Get your rear end back here and help me with these tires! You, too, Julio!” Father bellowed, even though his sons were just a few feet away.

“Yes, Father,” they replied in unison.

The job took a good couple of hours. One by one, they rolled each tire over to the vineyard. Neither boy asked why; they both just followed Father’s instructions. By the time they were finished, there were tires scattered down each row and the three

Gallos were soaked to their marrow. The wind had picked up and the temperature was dropping. Ernest shivered. He couldn't imagine ever feeling warm and dry again.

Though dinner was late that night, Mama's polenta was extra good. Ernest caught her putting a few more drops of wine than usual in his water and the two exchanged a quick smile. Even if the rest of him was still cold, he was grateful for the warmth in his stomach. He was also hopeful that Father had forgotten about the whipping. Moving the tires had been difficult, but maybe there was a silver lining. He nudged Julio and asked to be excused so they could wash the dishes. The cookware and plates had never been cleaned faster than they were that night. As soon as the last spoon was dried and placed in its wobbly drawer, Ernest rushed to his bedroom to do his homework. If Father couldn't see him, maybe he'd forget about the beating.

Ernest fell asleep to the sound of the rain against the roof. It seemed that each spring his bedroom ceiling would sprout a new leak, and no matter where he placed his mattress the fissure was sure to be right overhead. As dog-tired as he was, deep sleep wasn't in the cards that night. His unconscious mind lay in wait for that first drop. When he started to nod off, he dreamt of rough seas with waves taller than the house, in which he and Julio were frantically trying to row the dinghy that held them toward an unseen but certain shore.

"Ernest! Julio! Get up!!! Immediatamente!" Father's voice boomed through the house.

Of course, Ernest thought, Father had remembered his undelivered thrashing. He rubbed his eyes and wondered what time it was. The rain had stopped but the sky was still dark.

His father stood in the doorway. "Get dressed now! Meet me in the vineyard."

Ernest pulled the thick sweater Nonna had knit him over his overalls. Two years later and the sleeves were still two inches too long—his long-awaited growth spurt yet but a promise. He met Julio at the back door. They laced up their boots, grabbed a couple of lamps, and ran to the vineyard.

Father handed Ernest a can of gasoline and urged, “Pour this over the tires. We have to protect the vines from the frost.” The words left his mouth in a crystalized puff. Suddenly Ernest noticed how cold it was.

Joe trailed his eldest son, dropping a lit match on each wet tire. As the rubber began to burn, it snuffed out the flames. The vineyard was soon blanketed in a thick black smoke. Ernest choked and couldn’t see where he was going. He tripped over the untouched tires behind him, pulled the hem of his sweater over his nose, and hurried to finish the task.

No one within twenty-five miles saw the sun rise the next day. The light that managed to leach through the shroud over Joe Gallo’s vineyard revealed rows of charred vines that would never bear fruit again. Ernest’s stomach churned. Yesterday the Zinfandels and Alicantes they had grafted on the Thompson rootstocks had been full of young buds and the promise of an abundant crop. He inwardly berated his father. Joe’s pride was lethal. Ever since moving to Antioch, Father had planted the wrong crop in the wrong place at the wrong time. Ernest couldn’t understand why his father never asked more experienced farmers for advice or paid attention to their habits. It wasn’t a sign of weakness; it was the smart thing to do. If he knew that at twelve, why couldn’t his thirty-nine-year-old father see that?

“That’s it! I quit this stupid farm. This stupid way of life!” Joe wailed to his speechless family before striding back to the house.

Joe's most efficient accomplishment of those four years in Antioch was the speed with which he sold the farm. They headed south just two weeks after the conflagration, Ernest and Julio hung on to the taut jute that secured their three mattresses to the truck. Any possessions that didn't fit in the truck's bed or couldn't be strapped to the roof or bumpers had to be left behind. Ernest wriggled to find a spot where he wouldn't be poked by a protruding pot handle or tool. Baby Joe sat between Father and Mama in the front seat.

As the farmhouse disappeared from sight, Ernest tipped his cap. "Good riddance!" he shouted. "I hope I never see you again!" He flopped on his back and looked up at the blue sky. He remembered Nonna's words: *Let's go ahead with courage. When God closes one door, He opens another.*