

# Dark Vineyard

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## Dark Vineyard

Martin Walker is a prize-winning journalist and the author of several acclaimed works of non-fiction, including *The Cold War: A History*. He lives in the Dordogne and Washington, DC.<sup>1</sup>

The distant howl of the siren atop the mairie broke the stillness of the French summer night. It was an hour before dawn but Bruno Courreges was already awake, his thoughts churning with memories and regrets about the woman who had until recently shared his bed. For a brief moment he froze, stilled by the eerie sound that carried such a weight of history and alarm. This same siren had summoned his neighbors in the small town of Saint-Denis to war and invasion, to liberation and peace, and it marked the hour of noon each day. Its swooping whine also served to call the town's volunteer firemen to their duty. Such an emergency invariably required his presence as the sole municipal policeman of Saint-Denis. The brusque summons shook him from his melancholy thoughts, and he thrust aside the tangled sheets.

As Bruno dressed and swigged from a carton of milk by way of breakfast, his cell phone rang. It was Albert, one of the two professionals who led the town's team of pompiers, and he, his truck and his night patrol were already en route.

"There's a big fire up on the old road to Saint-Chamassy," Albert began, an urgency in his voice. "It's at the top of the hill, just before the turn to Saint-Cyprien. A barn and a big field. This time of year it could spread for miles if the wind gets up."

"I'll join you there," Bruno said, tucking the phone between his shoulder and his ear as he tried to fasten his shirt buttons. He squeezed his eyes shut to draw on the map of the sprawling commune of Saint-Denis that he kept in his head. It was composed of the roads he patrolled, the isolated homes and hamlets he visited, the farms he knew, with their flocks of geese and ducks and pigs and goats that made this the gastronomic heartland of France. His familiarity with the ground over which he hunted, and searched for mushrooms after it rained, meant that he knew his district like a woman knows her own face.

"There's no report of any casualties," said Albert. "But you'd better alert the hospital as soon as you've told the mayor. I'm calling Les Ezyies and Saint-Cyprien for support. Can you stop at the station and make sure they send up the spare water tankers when the rest of the guys get in? Drive one of the tankers yourself if you have to. We'll need all the water we can find. I'll see you at the scene."

"What about evacuation? There are four or five farms up there."

"I don't know yet, but the mayor had better start phoning people to put them on alert. Get a warning out on Radio Perigord."

Bruno prayed that his elderly and sometimes temperamental van would start right away. He quickly fed his dog, left his chickens to fend for themselves and ran to the vehicle. It

started at once, and he drove one-handed down the lane from his cottage toward town, thumbing the auto dial on his phone to alert first the mayor and then the chief doctor, each of whom already had been awoken by the siren. Lights were on inside people's homes, and the town was stirring as Bruno drove at high speed to the gendarmerie to tell old Jules on the night desk to call the radio station in Perigueux and to dispatch men to seal off the road near the fire. As Bruno hurried back out to his van, Captain Duroc rushed into the main building from the small barracks next door, still pulling on his uniform jacket. Bruno left Jules to explain the situation. At the fire station, Ahmed and Fabien were struggling with the towing rig for the tankers as the other volunteers were arriving, sufficient to man the trucks and tenders. Bruno drove on as fast as his van could manage, his blue light flashing and the town siren still howling into the night behind him.

By the time he reached the open road by the railway line to Sarlat, he could see the broad glow in the hills above. Bruno shivered with apprehension. Fire frightened him. He had always treated it with a wary respect, which had become something close to fear since he'd hauled some wounded French soldiers from a burning armored car during the Balkan Wars. His left arm still carried the scars. In his bedside drawer was the Croix de Guerre the government had awarded him for his efforts, after a lengthy debate among bureaucrats as to whether the Bosnian peacekeeping mission was actually a war.

Bruno wondered if there was anything in the jumble in the back of his van that might serve as protective gear. There would be gloves and a cap in his hunting jacket, his hunting boots and some swimming goggles and a bottle of water in his sports bag. Maybe there was an old tennis shirt he could soak and use as a face mask. He pushed the accelerator harder as the van labored up the hill. He knew this area well but tried in vain to remember where there might be a barn this high up on the plateau, where the land was too poor for farming. It was mainly woods and thin pasture, some tumbledown shepherds' bories of old stone, plus the tall microwave tower.

As Bruno rounded the last bend before the plateau, the whole night sky ahead seemed to pulse and glow red above the trees. He remembered the dry summer, the river so low that the tourist canoes had to search out the deeper channels. Now he could smell the burning. He slowed down. At least some of the pulsing red was the flashing light of Albert's fire truck. Bruno parked off the road. He put on his boots, gloves and hunting cap, looked at his swimming goggles and stuffed them into a pocket, poured water on the tennis shirt he had found and ran up the road to the truck, where two pompiers stood bracing the spouting hose, silhouetted against the flames.

"Not a barn, just a big wooden shed. We couldn't save it," shouted Albert over the crackling of the flames and the roaring noise of the truck. He reached into the back of the vehicle and pulled out a heavy yellow fireman's jacket and handed it to Bruno, nodding his approval of the stout boots on Bruno's feet.

"It could have been a lot worse. We were here in time to stop it from spreading to the woods."

More pulsing lights began to grow on the road as Ahmed approached with the second fire truck and the big water tanker, and then there were flashes of blue as the gendarmes arrived in their big van. Albert was calling the neighboring fire chiefs to say their help would not be needed.

"No sign of any people?" Bruno asked. Albert shook his head and ran off to direct the second truck. "How did you hear about the fire?" Bruno called after him.

"Anonymous call from the phone booth in Coux," Albert shouted back.

Bruno made a mental note of that as he tried to get his bearings. He remembered this road being thickly wooded on both sides, but where he stood there was a break in the trees, and a new-looking dirt track curved into the wide stretch of field and pasture that was burning low but steadily. What little breeze he felt on his cheeks was coming toward him and toward the woods, where the pompiers were soaking the brush to deny the flames any fresh fuel. The biggest fire was the ruin of what had been the shed, standing amid the charred crop. Bruno's foot caught on something. He looked down and saw a small metal flag, like the one farmers used to identify which seeds they had sown in which rows. He plucked it from the ground and, in the light from the truck headlights, read the words *AGRICOLAE SECH G71*. That meant nothing to him, but he stuffed the flag into his pocket. Shouts came from behind, and he turned to see more yellow-clad pompiers struggling up with a second hose, which bucked in their hands as it filled and a much more powerful jet of water lanced onto the edge of the woods.

"Smell anything funny?" Albert asked, suddenly looming beside him. "Come on, this way."

He led Bruno across the still smoldering ground and around the side of the shed until they were upwind, where it was quieter. Inside the shed, a metal table supporting some charred machinery was still hot enough to spit as water dripped from what was left of the roof beams. Two smoking roof timbers thrust into the sky, perched on top of what looked like an old filing cabinet. Bruno caught a stink of burned plastic and rubber, and something else.

"Gasoline?" he asked.

"That's what I think. We'll send some trace evidence off to the lab in Bordeaux, but I'll bet this was deliberate. If you go over to the far side of the field, you'll smell it again. Somebody was thorough--he got the crops, the shed, everything. This is going to be a job for you a lot more than for me."

"If it's arson, it's the Police Nationale," said Bruno. It would be a good idea to seal off the phone booth in Coux to check fingerprints, Bruno thought.

"If it's arson against crops," said Albert, "it's local. Some farmers' feud or somebody's been playing games with another man's wife. And that means the Police Nationale won't have the first idea where to start."

Bruno nodded, peering at something in the shed that struck him as odd. "Albert, have you ever seen a filing cabinet and office stuff like that in a farmer's shed in the middle of a field?"

"No. Looks like it could be a computer, though there's no electricity up here. Maybe it's an old typewriter."

Bruno turned away and was walking across to the point where the charred crops stopped when an explosion came with a flat crunch. Light flared, and a rush of heat stunned him as he turned and saw Albert topple to his knees amid the debris of the shed, which was bright with new flames.

His forearm up to protect his eyes against the searing heat, Bruno ran instinctively toward Albert and grabbed him by the collar. Fighting down fear as he plunged into the flames that seemed hungry to engulf him, Bruno hauled Albert back. The fire chief's legs dragged limply through the flaring wood of the shed, and his trousers were on fire. Once the two men were clear of danger, Bruno spread-eagled himself over Albert's legs to douse the flames with the fireproof material of his jacket. And then the other firemen were there, spraying them both with foam from handheld extinguishers.

Ahmed hauled Bruno up and shone a flashlight into his face, shouting, "You okay?" while others tended to Albert. Bruno nodded, shook himself and rose a little jerkily to his feet, brushing away the thick foam that covered him.

"A bit scorched, but nothing serious thanks to that jacket Albert gave me," he said. "What the hell was that explosion?"

"An aerosol; maybe a can of paint or kerosene. Some bastards leave an almost empty fuel container at the scene and close the cap. The vapor can make it go off like a bomb once it's hot enough," Ahmed said with a shrug. "Albert never should have gotten that close. We'd have carried on hosing it but we had to put water on the edge of the fire, stop it from reaching the woods."

"My fault," said Bruno. "I was asking him about the equipment inside the shed."

Albert had been lifted to his feet and was shaking his head to clear it, flecks of the foam flying off from his helmet and jacket. Bruno asked him how he was.

"I'll live to make a fool of myself another day. Some damn thing hit me on the ear," said Albert. He put his hand up to the side of his head and it came away bright with blood. One of the firemen gave him a bottle of water; he drank deeply, then rinsed his mouth, spat and looked across at Bruno and nodded once. "Thanks," he said quietly, handing him the water. Albert's hand was trembling. So, Bruno noticed, was his own.

"How are the legs?" Bruno asked. His voice was hoarse, and his throat hurt. The thought of

the gasoline and of the fire being set deliberately brought a surge of anger and a sudden sharp memory of the airfield at Sarajevo, the crunch of mortars and the screams of the men inside the armored car. Bruno had often wondered if he'd ever be able to go back into a fire. Now he knew, but he shuddered and took a deep breath to control himself.

"Not bad. I wear flameproof undertrousers, just like the race car drivers," Albert said, his voice raised. He spoke quickly as the adrenaline rushed through his system. "I'm okay, just a bit dizzy from whatever hit me."

More shouting erupted from behind them, and another fireman came running up.

"Hey Chief, there's a water main. The gendarmes just ran into a standpipe."

Albert looked at Bruno and rolled his eyes. "Probably the first time our Captain Duroc ever found anything, and even then he had to run into it."

They headed back to the road, where a jet of water was fountaining high from a broken standpipe and Fabien was doing something violent with a heavy wrench in the light of the only headlight on the gendarmes' van that wasn't broken. Captain Duroc could be heard shouting angrily at his men. Fabien gave a final twist of his wrench and the water stopped.

"We can use this now," he said. "There's not much pressure, but enough to damp down the embers."

"Where's that pipe going? Why isn't it on my maps?" Albert demanded angrily, mopping at his bloodied ear with a handkerchief.

"Looks like it goes from the water tower to the microwave station. That's Ministry of Defense, so they have a guard post," said Fabien. "And this standpipe is here because they have another pipe going off to that shed and the field. Looks to me like there's some fancy irrigation system installed."

"Irrigation? Up here?" said Albert. "Somebody's got more money than sense."

"Funny that the one field that has its own piped water supply is the one that gets torched," said Bruno. "You ever heard of this *Agricolae*?" He reached into his pocket and pulled out the small metal flag he had plucked from the ground.

"No. Could be some experimental seed, I suppose, but I never heard of anything like that up here."

They went back to the truck, where the elderly mayor, Gerard Mangin, stood patiently by the road. Behind him was a row of parked cars belonging to locals who had come to watch the excitement.

Other Books

The Vineyard, New York Times bestselling author Barbara Delinsky has written her most

complex and emotionally rewarding novel yet: a story of two women, a generation apart, each of whose dream becomes bound with the other's. To her family, Natalie Seebring is a woman who prizes appearances: exquisitely mannered, a supportive wife, and head of a successful wine-producing enterprise. So when she announces plans to marry a vineyard employee mere months after the death of her husband of fifty-eight years, her son and daughter are stunned. Faced with their disapproval, Natalie decides to write a memoir. Olivia Jones is a dreamer, living vicariously through the old photographs she restores. She and her daughter, Tess, cling to the fantasy that a big, happy family is out there just waiting for them. When Natalie hires Olivia to help with her memoir, a summer at Natalie's vineyard by the sea seems the perfect opportunity to live out that fantasy, but all is not as it seems. As the illusion of an idyllic existence comes crashing headlong into reality, the lives of these two women, parallel in so many ways, become a powerful and moving story.

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