

## Borderlines

Water sputtered from the hose as the rainwater tank emptied. It was a futile gesture to ward off the fire. This week would normally be the height of the harvest, and the air would be thick with the scent of crushed skins. Instead, the only thing ripening in the valley was the heat. This year's harvest was stacked in the truck. It was our last chance at survival after three years of drought. Bill used the rusted forklift to load as many barrels as he could onto the small flatbed.

Our vineyard was perched on a hillside, the marginal elevation providing more notice of the fires than those below. Anita shuttled between the truck and cellar, snatching every bottle she could cram into the cabin. The smoke above turned afternoon to dusk, the charcoal clouds blotting out the sun.

“Sure that’s wise?” I asked, throwing the hose to the ground.

“What?” Anita shouted over the gusts.

“All that alcohol, one ember and the whole truck goes up.”

Anita shooed me, continuing to wedge the bottles in.

“It’s forty bloody degrees,” I said. “You’re probably risking your life for vinegar.” I pinned my hat to my head, against the wind trying to tear it off.

“I’m only taking bottles older than 2017.”

“Stick a few in my boot if you want.”

They secured the loads before taking off down the driveway. The wheels spun under the weight of the barrels, kicking up dust which combined with the haze that settled in the air. Anita held her hand to her ear and mimed for me to call her. I told them I’d follow. Truth was, I kept finding reasons to stay behind. I looked across the valley and could see the fire had almost reached Patterson’s farm.

I scanned the entrance to the property, shielding my eyes from the bright amber glow expanding along the horizon as the wooden gate flapped. North Ridge Estate adjoined our winery, separated by a trench the CFA bulldozed a few weeks back. We'd shut the winery for a week and spent several days removing anything that could fuel the fire. The blaze was coming from the northeast, which meant North Ridge was on the wrong side of the firebreak. The barren trench was twelve metres wide, enough to slow the inferno before it reached our property. We probably had an extra ten, twenty minutes tops.

I gripped the walkie-talkie and, through the static, the local fire captain shouted instructions to the SES and CFA. The local rally point was the sports hall at St Michael's primary school where Bill and Anita were headed with enough wine to get the whole town pissed. Sirens wailed from the east, their pitch rising and falling as trucks raced along roads in the distance.

North Ridge was abandoned, except for a khaki Mazda in the parking lot. The missing hubcap was unmistakable – Jim's car. The cellar room's light flickered. Branches fell onto the tiled roof, blown off towering eucalypts swaying in the fierce crosswinds. Jim probably had the same instincts as Bill and Anita to save as much stock before leaving. But I didn't see him loading the car. The scattered leaves had turned the parking area into perfect kindling, brittle and waiting for a spark.

Jim had complained about everything over the years — our customers using his parking lot when ours was full, us selling wine to Dan Murphy's, our fence line encroaching on his by half a foot. Half a bloody foot. I thought about leaving him to it, God knows he deserved it, but a part of me wanted to hear that he needed something from me. It'd been years since we had a

conversation that wasn't relayed through our lawyers. But I walked down the driveway anyway, crossed the firebreak, and marched toward the orange sky.

The North Ridge sign hung askew on its post, one chain broken. Weeds pushed through the footpath that led to the entrance and grass had started sprawling in the rose bushes. A sheet of corrugated iron had peeled back from the roof.

I pushed the cellar door open and scanned the reception area. Barrels served as tables with tasting menus on top, stools arranged around them, probably untouched for weeks. Shelves of wine lined the walls. The counter area was bare, the cash register left open. I walked to the back toward another room which looked like a staffroom. The room was dark except for a dim lamp in the corner. I'd always wondered how other wineries arranged their stock. Even less glamorous ones like North Ridge.

"The hell do you want, Alan?" Jim said, startled but not enough to move from where he'd sunk into the leather couch. He sipped from his glass and immediately topped it up from the bottle in his other hand.

"We've been told to evacuate. Not sure how long until the fire reaches us."

"I'm staying to fight," Jim said, slurring his words as he took another long sip.

My gaze fell to his feet. An empty bottle of the same wine lay there. "Don't be a dickhead. The dam's dried up. You'll die here."

"Why do you care?" The bottle slipped from between his stubby fingers, the maroon liquid soaking into the shag carpet. "Shit!"

"The carpet's the least of your worries."

"It was a '94 Cab Sauv."

Through the window in the distance, I could see embers floating in the air like tiny lanterns, the smoke dimming the orange sky. The walkie-talkie crackled. The fire captain confirmed the blaze had reached Patterson's farm. "Did you hear that? It's ten kilometres away. We have to go. Now."

Pushing himself out of the chair, he grumbled under his breath, setting his glass on the coffee table. He'd thickened with age, breathing hard from the effort of standing. "I need your help first."

I wondered what was so important that he'd confess he needed my help. "Jim, there's no time." But he was already shuffling toward the back door.

I followed him through the courtyard where the wind howled, carrying the fire's distant roar. The same courtyard where he'd once accused me of stealing his landscaper. Where we'd argued over the placement of the recycling bins blocking his delivery access.

The barn housed a rusted tractor and golf cart, gardening tools scattered across the concrete. Two stainless steel vats towered beside them, almost reaching the tin roof. Inside, the wind's howl became muted and, for a moment, we could breathe properly. Jim ambled to a partitioned corner and pointed at a safe on the floor. He sat at his desk to catch his breath, lacking any sense of urgency, as though he wasn't flammable.

"Underneath that."

I positioned myself between the wall and the safe, planting my feet firmly against a steel beam. "Are you going to help?" I asked.

Jim sighed, mumbling under his breath as he took his position on the opposite side. We leaned in and pushed the wall with our feet. The safe scraped across concrete, leaving deep scratches in the floor, revealing a trapdoor. The metal handle was coated in dust and cobwebs.

Jim struggled with it, his thick fingers fumbling with the latch. When it finally gave way, stale air rushed out. This hidden cellar where he kept his best years, the ones he'd never sell, never share. He reached down, wincing, and I could see three bottles nested in foam, but he only pulled out one which was covered in dust.

“You know you’re supposed to put that *in* the safe,” I said, wiping sweat from my brow.

Jim appeared to ignore my comment, his eyes fixed on the bottle which he turned over in his hands. “First bottle of North Ridge Estate. ‘75 Shiraz. First harvest my father didn’t oversee. Everything we planted finally came good.”

The same vintage that took gold over our Syrah at the national wine show that year. He’d never let me forget, neither would my father. “You’re not drinking that now, we need to leave.”

“I’m taking it with me,” he said, holding the bottle like a newborn.

“Well then let’s go.”

“It’s for when I retire next year,” Jim said, looking through the entrance, staring at the swaying trees.

“Retiring?”

“Selling up. I don’t have it in me anymore.”

I looked at the scorched vines visible through the barn door. It was a hell of a final harvest. Thirty years of sweat and soil, and he was walking away with nothing but a single dusty bottle.

We retraced our steps back to the cellar door, the wind striking our faces like a searing broiler. The air smelled like ash. Jim gripped the bottle with both hands as he zigzagged back to

the cellar room. The sky had turned the colour of burnt brick. “My car is just up the driveway.” I said.

“Can’t walk up there. Bung knees. I’ll just drive.” He stood bent over, catching his breath.

“Jim, don’t be an idiot—” I unclipped the keys from his belt. “You can barely walk straight.”

He cut me off, ripping the keys back from my hands. “I’ll bloody drive. I know these roads better than anyone.”

I led him to his car, thinking of ways I could change his mind, but he’d opened the driver’s side door and got in before I could try. The door struggled to stay open in the howling gale, slamming shut.

He wound down the window. “I know we’ve had our differences. I’ve just always wanted the success you’ve had.” He placed a hand on the steering wheel and slid the key into the ignition.

I’d always thought hearing a concession from Jim would be like rain after a drought, but all I felt was my chest tightening. He had thirty years to say something. Now he tells me.

“We can talk more at the school hall where we’re supposed to meet everyone,” I said. “Let’s go.” I turned toward the firebreak to head back when Jim called out to me.

“Alan, can you take this bottle there? Not sure I trust myself with it next to me in my current state. I’ll meet you there.” He wound his window up, sealing himself inside.

I clutched the bottle under my arm and headed back toward my car, leaning into the headwind that pelted me with dust and dry leaves. I walked back along the crushed gravel path,

my calves complaining with each step. The sounds of sirens in the distance grew louder. I climbed in, setting the bottle on the passenger seat, as I started the engine.

I looked at my phone and saw eight missed calls from Anita and several text messages from Bill. They'd made it to the school hall safely. I texted back that I was on my way with Jim. Bill immediately replied with three question marks.

I drove down the driveway and turned onto the road that ran parallel to the firebreak. I pulled over and, through the smoke, could see Jim sitting in his car, the cabin light on. He raised his hand and gave a half-hearted wave. I waited a minute, engine idling, but his car didn't move. I calculated the angle to turn around. It would take maybe thirty seconds. The walkie-talkie screamed one last garbled warning, then died. I looked at Jim's car, at the firebreak between us. My hands were already turning the steering wheel forward. He knows these roads. He said so himself.

I crept up the road, away from the direction of the blaze, my eyes locked on the rearview mirror. The bottle sat on the passenger seat clinking against the seatbelt. I looked at Jim, and then at the road into town. I turned on my indicator and took one last look in the mirror. The interior light of Jim's car flickered once, then went dark. I drove toward town with his harvest and left the rest.