

# **Wild Fire**

## A Chaos Novella

### By Kristen Ashley



1001 DARK NIGHTS  
PRESS

## *Teaser*

### **Chapter One**

*Movie Star Gorgeous*

#### **Dutch**

Dutch's phone rang while he was in the T-U-V section at Fortnum's Used Books.

He pulled the cell out of the back pocket of his jeans and checked the screen.

JAGGER CALLING.

He loved his brother, but it was hit or miss if he'd pick up a call from the guy.

This was only because Jag was all about good times. Getting drunk. Getting laid. Getting out of town for a change of scenery, doing it on a long ride, and doing it in order to get drunk or laid in a fresh locale.

Jag was twenty-six, it was his time to carouse.

At least that's what their ma and Hound said.

Dutch was twenty-eight, and apparently it was his time to carouse too.

At least that was what their mother and Hound urged him to do.

Dutch just wasn't feeling it.

Not anymore.

Not that he ever did. That was not the kind of guy he was.

He could see getting a buzz on, and he did.

But being around dudes who were so drunk, they were either sloppy or turned into assholes, not so much.

Jag never took it that far. His brother just got happy(er) and (more) sociable when he got a buzz on.

Jag's puking-and-being-an-asshole days ended that night their motorcycle club, Chaos, voted Jagger in as prospect. Then they made him drink to the verge of alcohol poisoning. After that, with the mother of all hangovers, they made him clean up after himself and everyone else who'd over-imbibed.

Come to think of it, that was when Dutch's getting-drunk, puking-and-being-an-asshole days ended too. Before Jag's. When the brothers had taken Dutch on as a recruit and made him do the same thing.

These were the ways of Chaos, Dutch had learned.

Even shit that didn't seem to have a purpose, had a purpose.

Tack, their retired president, was that kind of guy, that was where he led the Club, and he'd cemented them there, all so he could hand that kind of Club down to his son.

Something he did.

In other words, no man wanted to be around another man who could not handle his booze. Who didn't know when to stop. Who got to the point he was puking and being an asshole.

So you learned right away in Chaos that wasn't the brother to be.

And they found a way to teach that lesson and made you that kind of brother.

He ignored the call, shoved the phone back into his pocket and slid the volume from the shelf.

Vonnegut. *Bluebeard*. Hardback.

Dutch opened the book and saw, in subtle pencil written at the top right of the opening page, \$5.<sup>00</sup>.

Vonnegut hardback, five dollars.

A freaking steal.

He set it on top of *Rabbit, Run* and retraced his steps to the M-N-O section.

He checked and it was a negatory.

They almost never had a copy of *Confederacy of Dunces*, which sucked.

So he retraced to E-F-G and hit gold.

Ellison. *Invisible Man*.

He snatched that up and headed to the Young Adult section, even though he knew it was a fool's errand. He'd checked every time he'd come to Fortnum's for the last year.

He was right.

It wasn't there.

He hit up the T-U-V section again, just in case it wasn't in Young Adult.

Nope.

Not there either.

Dutch then walked back up to the front and saw Duke, as usual, was behind the book counter.

The man's eyes came direct to him the instant he'd cleared the stacks.

Duke was a mainstay at Fortnum's. An ex-English professor who, decades ago, left the university politics, track to tenure and rat race behind, dropped out and made his life about his wife, his bike and his job at a used bookstore.

Dutch liked Duke, respected the man, but he didn't like the look in Duke's eyes these days when Dutch would come to the store. He further wasn't big on the looks Duke and Tex would exchange when Dutch was around.

Tex was a Vietnam vet, an ex-recluse, and an inveterate cat lover. So much of the last, there were dozens of pictures of cats, all Tex's, tacked haphazard on the wall behind the coffee counter under the shelves of cups and mugs.

The man was also a lunatic. And it was against all odds that huge, loud, bad-mannered, cat-loving dude was the best barista in the state and at least everyone in Denver knew it, so even now, when it was one in the afternoon, there was a line ten strong in front of the coffee counter.

But even with all that, Tex was a good guy. Solid.

Like Duke.

Family, the folk at Fortnum's. Duke, Tex, Indy (the owner of the store), Jet, one of Indy's best friends who also worked there, their large posse.

Dutch had a family like that. A big one of MC brothers and their women and their children.

Good, solid folk, down to their bones.

And yet...

“*Invisible Man*, this for you, or someone else?” Duke asked, taking Dutch’s attention, and Dutch realized he was so lost to his thoughts, he was working on autopilot and hadn’t noticed he’d approached the register and laid down his books.

“Someone else,” Dutch answered.

“You read it?” Duke asked.

“Yeah,” Dutch told him.

“Whole world should read it,” Duke muttered, jabbing a thick finger against the screen of the tablet that stood in for a till.

“Yeah,” Dutch agreed. “Listen, you wouldn’t have any copies of *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas that haven’t been shelved yet, would you?”

Duke shook his head. “Not many givin’ up that book. We get one, you want me to call you?”  
He could go to Barnes and Noble, easy.

With Tex as her barista, not to mention Indy and her crew all being the subject of those books that had been published, so folks came in all the time, Indy wasn’t hurting for customers, or cash.

Still, Dutch bought his books exclusively from Fortnum’s.

And he had a lot of books.

He had no idea why Fortnum’s was his go-to. It wasn’t about buying local or any of that other millennial shit.

Thinking on it, it was the fact he liked the vibe.

It was the fact that walking in there was like walking into someone’s house.

Like coming home.

To family.

Shaking off his thoughts, he agreed, “That’d be cool.”

“You wanna stay for a cup o’ joe and a talk?” Duke asked, and Dutch hid his surprise.

The man hadn’t approached. Not in word or deed.

There were the looks he gave Dutch, the ones he exchanged with Tex.

But he never said dick.

“No, got shit to do this afternoon,” he lied.

He had no shit to do that afternoon.

Or at all.

*Ever.*

“Boy—” Duke started.

“I’m not a boy,” Dutch bit.

His temper wasn’t usually short, but these days, it could be.

This was why Duke blinked.

He then said, “Son—”

“I’m not your son either,” Dutch returned.

“Right then.” Duke’s voice was no longer a friendly rumble. It was tight. “First, my age can’t have escaped you, considerin’ all this gray hair and wrinkles, so you are a boy to me, and you will be until you’re sixty and I’m dead. And second, any man’s a man at all, a man that’s younger than him and obviously struggling is his son. A son he looks after.”

Christ, was he not hiding it?

“I’m not struggling,” he lied again.

“Dutch—”

“Brother, just ring me up so I can get on with my day,” Dutch demanded.

Duke was silent a beat.

He then finished ringing him up, and Dutch paid.

“No bag,” he grunted.

Duke slid the books over the counter toward Dutch.

Dutch had turned, avoiding Tex’s eyes as he did, and started heading toward the door when Duke called, “You know that door is always open, but the one to my cabin in Evergreen is too, man.”

Duke was good people and Dutch had acted like an asshole.

So he lifted a hand and flicked out a finger to indicate he’d heard Duke’s words before he walked out the door.

It was early November, and cold, and he’d had a trip planned to Fortnum’s on his agenda that day, so he was not on his bike.

He was in his truck.

And right then, he walked the five blocks to his vehicle huddling into his leather cut. A spot that even five blocks away was considered a score in an area that had grown popular over the years, to the point all the good shit was smushed in with all the trendy shit.

Trendy, like there was a fucking tiki bar, for fuck’s sake.

As the years had gone by and the new edged out some of the old, Fortnum's had become the bastion of old-school cool on South Broadway in Denver.

And Dutch hoped like hell the millennials—of which he was one, but he wasn't a fan of his membership—got bored with Broadway and returned it to the freaks and geeks and antiquers and gays and hip cats and hipper pussycats who knew true cool came from a vintage clothing shop, not a Free People catalog.

He climbed into his truck as his phone rang again.

He checked it.

It was Jagger.

He ignored the call, started up his truck, and embarked on the only other item on his agenda that day.

He headed to King's Shelter, a safe place for runaway kids.

King's provided food. A bed. TV. Some counseling if you took it. Some tutoring, if you took that too.

Mostly, it was a no-pressure place for kids who couldn't hack home so they wouldn't be on the streets. They could get a decent meal, sleep in a clean bed, take a shower and catch up on their reality programs.

Right, that wasn't entirely accurate.

There was food, clean beds, and a huge TV.

But also, there was pressure.

That said, Juliet Crowe, the woman who ran the place, made an art of making pressure seem like no pressure.

If there was a way to reconcile shit at home, she'd find it, and reconcile that shit.

If there was no way, she'd figure out an alternate avenue for a kid that didn't include hanging downtown, falling into dealing, using, or whoring.

It was just she was a dab hand at finessing that shit.

He parked at the shelter, got out, grabbed one of the books, and headed in.

Chances were probably seventy-thirty the kid wouldn't be there.

Dutch's day looked up when he saw him there.

He didn't hesitate moving right to the guy who was not at one of the couches around the big sixty-incher, watching some show where three bitches were wearing skintight mini-dresses and four-inch heels, shouting at each other and pulling each other's hair.

He was sitting a table on the outskirts.

That was Carlyle.

The outsider.

Even at a shelter for runaway kids.

"The wig's gonna go, wait and see," he declared as Dutch made the table.

Dutch turned his head and looked at the TV.

Carlyle was right. One of the women was shrieking because another one had pulled off her wig.

Dutch sighed and looked back to a boy who was really no longer a boy.

The kid was six nine if he was an inch. Three hundred pounds if he was an ounce. Dark skin. Brown eyes hard as marbles.

He was also seventeen, and if something wasn't done, soon, he'd be free to do whatever he wanted.

And Dutch did not see this going in the right direction.

He knew why Carlyle was there.

And Dutch could be the only guy in Denver who could get him out of there.

And he needed to get this kid out of there.

Outside the obvious, Dutch had no idea what was at stake for the future.

The cure for cancer.

A Nobel Prize.

Or just this kid becoming a billionaire.

All he knew was that whatever was at stake was big.

He tossed the book on the table.

Carlyle didn't look at it, kept his eyes glued to the TV.

"Your mind's gonna turn to mush, you stare at that shit too long," Dutch warned.

That bought Carlyle's eyes.

"Yeah?" he asked, the word short and belligerent.

"Yeah," Dutch confirmed.

Carlyle said nothing.

“I’m adding to the shelter’s library,” Dutch told him, dipping his head toward the book.

“And why would I give a shit?” Carlyle queried.

“Because you’d do better reading a decent book than watching zombie television.”

Carlyle’s heavy brows went up. “Zombie television?”

“There’s nothing worthwhile to TV like that. It rots your mind. Turns you into a zombie.”

Carlyle straightened in his chair, and to a man who had not spent his formative years under the wing of the entirety of the Chaos MC, particularly a brother called Hound, Carlyle straightening might make his sphincter tighten.

But Dutch knew how to handle himself with fists, with a blade, with a piece, in most any situation. Chaos had seen to that.

More precisely, Hound had seen to that.

So when Carlyle’s attention focused more fully on him, Dutch didn’t twitch.

“Man, who gives a fuck?” he asked.

“I think me standing here is pretty good indication that I do,” Dutch replied.

Carlyle looked back to the TV, muttering, “Fuck off.”

“Carlyle—”

That was when he got the treatment he’d given Duke at Fortnum’s.

But Carlyle style.

“Do you think I’m invisible? Do you fuckin’ think I’m invisible?” Carlyle spat.

Somehow, even without looking at it, the kid had seen the cover of the book.

“What I think—” Dutch started.

“I’ve already read this book, motherfucker, and even if I hadn’t, hear me, I don’t need some white guy to show me the way of my people.”

With that, he shoved the book off the table. It fell to the floor, and Dutch and Carlyle had the attention of the room even before Carlyle pushed his chair back so hard, it fell over as he stood and stalked to and out the front door.

Dutch drew a sharp breath into his nose, put his hands to his hips, and stared at the closing door thinking, *That didn’t go very well.*

Then again, every approach he’d made for the last three months hadn’t gone well.

“Dutch.”

He heard her call his name, but he knew she was there before he heard it.

He turned, saw her standing about ten feet away, and serious as shit, Juliet Crowe was the most beautiful woman he'd seen in his whole goddamned life.

Movie star gorgeous.

Fuck.

He went to the book, bent, picked it up and set it on the table, headed to the chair and righted it, all before he moved her way.

He'd barely stopped in front of her when she asked, "You all right?"

"Tryin' to find a way to get in there, like we talked about."

"What was the book?" she asked.

"*Invisible Man*."

She nodded, and even though he didn't sense any disapproval, Dutch kept talking.

"It's not lost on me he's a Black guy, but it's just a really good book."

"He read *Skinny Legs and All* last week," she shared.

Dutch felt something in his chest loosen.

As far as he knew, nothing he'd tried these last months had gotten in there, and it wasn't just books. He'd offered Carlyle his time. He'd offered to share his story. He'd asked the kid if he wanted to work out with him at his boxing gym.

Nothing got in there.

But he'd brought *Skinny Legs and All* the week before.

"Shoulda brought in *Bluebeard*," he muttered.

"Cops came yesterday, looking for him," she went on.

Shit, shit, *shit*.

"Any news?" Dutch asked.

She shook her head, letting the concern leak into her eyes. "I talked to Eddie, the case is cold. They're closing loops, moving on."

*Shit, shit, shit*.

Dutch just stared at her, but he did it meaningfully.

She got closer so he knew she read his meaning.

"Dutch, every time a kid with promise, which is every kid that walks through those doors, comes here, and there's a situation, I have to weigh whether or not I ask my husband and his

band of badass brothers to wade in and sort out that situation. Carlyle is no different. And Vance and the guys cannot spend all their time sorting out the problems of the kids at King's. They all have mortgages to pay, for one. For another, that's *my* job."

"Carlyle is a kid with a one hundred and forty-nine IQ who has full rides to MIT, Stanford and Columbia whose dad was shot dead while saving the life of a neighbor who had an intruder who was set on doin' more than stealin' from the woman. Carlyle is this fuckin' close," he held a thumb and forefinger in front of her eyes to demonstrate a point she knew better than him, "to flushing his entire life down the toilet. So I think Vance, Lee, Luke and company should tap in on this one and find the person who killed Carlyle's dad because the cops obviously cannot."

Vance—her husband—Lee, Luke and company being part of the band of badass brothers that made up Nightingale Investigations.

And while the cops had limited resources and rules they had to abide by, the boys at Nightingale did not.

"You know that I know about your dad, Dutch," she said softly.

He dropped his hand and stepped away.

"I know he was targeted because he was fighting the good fight," she kept at him.

"We're not talking about my father," he bit out.

"Aren't we?" she asked carefully.

"I had a mountain of support and I'm not a certified genius," he shot back.

"Carlyle has the same support, it just takes some kids time to work the hurt out, and the best we can do is make sure they don't stray too far while they're doing it," she returned.

"And what if he strays too far?"

Her eyes narrowed.

Her husband might be in a badass brotherhood, but Juliet Crowe used to be known as The Law. Years ago, she'd gone rogue when one of her kids overdosed, and she'd set about vigilante-ing the shit out of the drug dealers of Denver.

She'd been good at it.

She'd refocused her attention to King's, but the Lore of The Law had not died, which was most of the reason why she had so many kids there, they'd had to build onto the shelter.

And her years with the kids, her husband, her own brood of boys she and Vance had made, and her time on the streets meant she didn't miss much.

And she wasn't missing much now.

"What do you know?" she asked.

"He's not keeping good company, Jules."

"And you know this...how?" she pushed.

"I know it because when he clocked me, I saw him slip out the back of Shady's when he's too damn young to be in Shady's in the first place. Shady's is Resurrection's hang. I asked one of the Resurrection brothers who Carlyle was talkin' to and he shared it was a dude I did not want to know, and he wouldn't be comin' back to Shady's because Resurrection wasn't down with his presence there. And he hasn't been back. And neither has Carlyle."

She pressed her lips tightly together before she unpressed them to ask, "What? Drugs?"

"Black market."

"Black market what?"

"Black market everything. Designer gear. Pharmaceuticals. Maple syrup. Freakin' sperm. Anything and *everything*."

She looked surprised. "Maple syrup?"

"Yeah. That was my reaction. I looked it up. It's a thing in Canada. Farmers sell it under the table."

"Whoa," she muttered.

"This guy is part of a bigger operation," Dutch told her. "An operation that gets their hands on a kid like that, with a brain like his, he's hacking for the Russians at a million dollars an hour or worse."

He now saw humor in her expression as she said, "You have a very inventive mind."

He saw no humor in this situation at all and therefore laid it out.

"No, my dad's throat was slit in the parking lot of a pizza joint when he was gettin' into his truck to bring dinner home to his family. This put my mother in a tailspin it took nearly two decades for her to haul herself out of, which meant the man who loved her who was breathin', a man she also loved, didn't have her until it was almost too late for them to make their own family. And I know, along that road, no matter how much support I had, I asked myself the question of what the fuck's the point? A good man tries to do good, and gets his throat slit. A good man tries to do good, and gets a bullet to the neck and bleeds out on his neighbor's bedroom floor. So my mind isn't inventive, Jules. I know that dark place it goes when you think

this world is so fucked, the only course you got is to get what you can for yourself and fuck everyone else.”

“Point taken,” she murmured.

“Talk to Vance,” he ordered.

She shook her head. “I had Roam come in, chat with Carlyle, the wall he has up...” She paused, got closer, lowered her voice, and kept going. “I’m not saying I’m giving up on him. I don’t give up on them even if they walk out that door and give up on us. I’m just warning you, Dutch, that sometimes, there’s no help they’ll accept. Sometimes, they’re so set to stay in that dark place, you could run yourself ragged, and there’s no pulling them out.”

Roam used to be a kid in that shelter.

Roam was now known off the street as Roman, and he was a member of the badass brotherhood at Nightingale Investigations.

“It isn’t a Black thing,” he told her, because Roam was also Black.

“Roam was in this shelter. Roam gets it.”

“It’s a murdered father thing, Jules.”

She nodded.

“I fucked up, making it a Black thing,” he said.

“Yes,” she agreed quietly.

“Fuck,” he muttered.

She read his face again and went back on what she’d said earlier. “You could still get in there, Dutch. I mean, he was reading Tom Robbins last week.”

“Yeah, but now I’m that well-intentioned, clueless, white dude biker so I’m out before I was ever really in,” he returned.

“I don’t think so. Roam told him about your dad.”

Dutch clenched his teeth.

Jules kept talking.

“Roam told him about your dad, and he picked up that book, Dutch. There are different kinds of brotherhoods, and sadly, you two belong to an unusual one. And Carlyle is not one of those smart kids who’s so topped out in brains, he’s got no room for logic. He’ll put it together that a biker wearing a cut isn’t coming to a shelter and focusing on him because he wants to brag over cocktails that he’s giving back to society. Just give him time.”

Dutch looked over her head, something he could do, because the woman was not short, but he was six two.

“Vance dropped that bug in your ear about Carlyle for a reason, Dutch,” she said.

He looked right at her.

It was not lost on him they’d played him. It was not lost on him that Vance, who was sober, was hanging at the Chaos Compound while the guys were throwing some back, when he rarely hung at the Compound, and he was talking about one of Jules’s kids for the exact reason he was hanging at the Compound, talking about one of Jules’s kids.

He was maneuvering Dutch’s ass to be right there in an effort to get shit sorted with one of Jules’s kids.

Nope, Juliet Crowe never gave up on any of her kids.

“I’ll figure something out,” he said.

She smiled at him.

And taking that smile in, knowing the woman she was, the heart she had, the grit, he had no idea how old she was, he just knew she was older than him by more than a decade.

But if she was not married to a man who she made clear was her heartbeat, and the mother to their three kids, Dutch would want in there.

Permanently.

He nodded, muttered some words of farewell, and moved out.

His phone rang as he made his way to his truck.

He pulled it out again, saw it was Jagger, and felt a frisson of disquiet slide up the back of his neck.

Three calls in less than an hour, that wasn’t about going out and tying one on.

It could be their mother. Hound. Their little brother, Wilder. Any brother, really, in Chaos, their woman or one of their kids.

This on his mind, he took the call as he angled his ass into his truck.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“Hey, you busy?” Jagger asked in return.

That wasn’t the lead-in to trouble.

And regrettably, he was not busy.

Though Jag could need or want anything, most of that something Dutch wanted no part of, so he didn't share that news.

"What's up?" he repeated.

"Listen, I'm elbow deep in a build with Joker and unless we bust ass, we're not gonna make the deadline on this ride. And Carolyn has taken an extra shift because her landlord's an asshole and raised the rent. Again. So we need someone to go to the airport and pick up her sister. Carolyn thought I could do it. *I* thought I could do it. But we can't get this bitch to turn over and we don't know why, so I can't do it. Which means I need to ask you to do it. Her flight lands in an hour."

Dutch did not like this.

Carolyn was Jag's on-again, off-again girlfriend. There was no future to it, and both of them were down with that. They gravitated to each other when one of them was lonely or one of them wanted a good time or something familiar.

Carolyn lived in an apartment that was outside her reach because Carolyn had champagne tastes and a Diet Coke budget. Though one thing you could say about Carolyn, she worked for what she wanted. Which meant extra shifts as a CNA in a nursing home, a lot of house sitting, dog walking, babysitting and anything else she could do to earn a buck to pay for her trendy pad and her designer shoes.

Eventually, though, Carolyn would marry white picket fence. That wasn't Dutch's judgment. The woman was honest to the point of bluntness. She made no bones she was enjoying some rough trade before she pursued, then settled in with the real catch.

For some reason, Jag took no offense to this.

Dutch did.

He'd been around Carolyn a lot.

He'd never met the sister, but he'd heard about her, seeing as the sister was not a big fan of Carolyn's lifestyle and all that entailed and that bugged the shit out of Carolyn, who was a fan of sharing just about anything, including how much of a pain in the ass her big sister was.

Carolyn could loosen up enough to find her good times.

But from all reports, the sister had a stick up her ass lodged so high and tight, it'd take surgery and a miracle to extract it.

In other words, he had zero desire to drive to DIA to pick that woman up.

“Can’t she Lyft?” Dutch asked.

“She’s got some issue with Lyft, and Uber, I forget what it is. Reports of driver attacks on women or they’re not paid enough or whatever it is with her, which is always something,” Jag answered.

Yeah, from what he’d heard, it was always something.

“Right, so she can take a taxi,” Dutch pointed out.

“It’d cost a mint.”

“Light rail goes out there, Jag,” Dutch kept at it. “It also comes back.”

“Dude, if you’ve got nothin’ on, can’t you do your brother a solid?” Jagger demanded.

This was a good question.

Shit.

“Yeah, I can do you a solid.”

“Thanks,” Jagger replied. “I’ll text her flight details and I’ll get Carolyn to send a picture of her so you know who you’re looking for.”

“Great.”

“Seriously, appreciate it, Dutch.”

“Yeah.”

“Later, brother.”

“Later.”

He disconnected, fired up his truck, and was at a stoplight before he checked his phone after he heard several texts come in.

The flight details, her name and...

Fuck.

A picture, and she couldn’t be any different than her blonde-haired, blue-eyed sister.

It was a candid, no doubt taken in portrait mode on an iPhone.

It looked like it was a posed shot done by a top-notch fashion photographer.

Goofing off, head slightly turned, brown eyes twinkling, wind in her dark, curly hair, sunshine lighting her flawless skin, making a kissy face with full lips.

Georgiana Traylor was movie star gorgeous.

“Fantastic,” he muttered, shoved his phone back into his pocket, and headed to DIA.

***Wild Fire* will be released September 22, 2020**

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