



WHISKEY NEAT

WHISKEY VEX BOOK ONE

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I WAS CONCEIVED TO START THE APOCALYPSE NOW I'VE BEEN TASKED WITH STOPPING ONE

Half-demon Whiskey Vex was born because her father wanted to start an apocalypse, but he didn't anticipate her mother raising her with a conscience. Now she's a good guy, keeping both the humans and the preternaturals in her adopted small town southern home safe under the guise of being a paranormal investigator while working for Fred—The Powers That Be—gathering cursed objects and removing them from the human world.

When it's discovered someone is trying to raise War, one of the four horsemen, Fred assigns her to figure out who, how, and why. All on an impossibly tight deadline.

Whiskey's only tackled one big case, and she failed. Since then she's kept to low-level assignments that didn't affect more than a dozen people. If she doesn't solve this case, the world—including her adopted small town—will cease to exist.

Because once the scales are tipped in a horseman's favor, nothing can stop the apocalypse.



IT WAS DAMMED inconvenient the world went to shit while I was coming off a three-day bender. Not because I had anything to do with the world going to shit, mind you, but because the whole thing was incredibly confusing to someone who was still a little drunk and dealing with a massive headache.

I should point out I had nothing to do with *this* imminent apocalypse threat. Yes, Dad conceived me to kick off that whole buzz kill. My entire existence is tethered to his ambition to rule the world and bring hellfire to rain down on humans—blah, blah, blah. When it became clear the end of days wasn't going to happen the moment Mom kicked me out of her uterus, he pinned all his hopes and dreams on my teenage years.

He didn't understand how rebellious teenagers tended to be. He also didn't count on Mom raising me to be a strong, independent woman with a crap-ton of empathy, which tends to get in the way of burning down the universe. Lucky for me, by the time he realized I wouldn't follow along with his slash-and-burn, shock-and-awe program, he had fallen completely in love with me.

Even a demon can't resist the chubby cheeks and coos of their baby girl.

Mom spent most of my formative years guarding me against Dad's evil influence and fending off his incredibly inappropriate but marvelous ways of showing affection.

Like my tenth birthday. I, like most kids that age, had begged and pleaded for a pony. I was obsessed. Horse posters wallpapered my room, and dozens of shelves were lined with Breyer horses and My Little Pony. I spent hours with the *State Line Tack* and *Dover* catalogs, picking out every bit of minutiae I would need for a horse, from hoof picks to a jacket embroidered with my name and made-up stable logo.

There was a horse in my front yard when I woke up that birthday morning. He was magnificent. I was thrilled beyond belief. Mom was not. Turns out Dad had sent up a NightMare. An underworld steed with flaming mane and tail, blood-red eyes and hooves that smelled of sulfur with every step. She stood out a just a bit in our suburban neighborhood.

Mom told him to take that thing straight back to the pits of hell it came from. Gutted, I cried for three days straight.

Dad somehow arranged the purchase of a fifteen-acre farm in the country and staffed it with demon farmhands. Mom's thrill level stayed the same, but by that point I think she was ready to wash her hands of both of us, so she gave up and moved us to rural Alabama. That's how we ended up in Cautious the summer before my first year in middle school.

I was a more rebellious teen than most, but I was rebelling against wiping out the world, so I had an excellent reason.

Over the years, as the screaming fights between us calmed down, Dad and I worked out some ground rules. I knew he wished I would join the dark side and destroy the world, but he didn't mention it anymore, knowing if he did, I'd be out of his life forever. In the end, he chose me over the apocalypse.

Back to this particular end of the world—yes, there've been several close calls before this one, none of which I was involved in, for the record—I had walked into my office in what I hoped was a straight line. My best friend, Mumford Coldwater, was feeding Ellvoloth, a nasty character I'd trapped in the form of a bunny a few years back. We called him Elvis because it pissed him off and amused us. I'd tried to rehome him several times, but no one else would put up with him.

I shuffled to my desk and fell a bit too hard in my chair, groaning at the shock wave that hit my brain. I shrugged out of my short denim jacket and wished again I'd gone home to change. I'd still be there if I had, passed out happily in my bed. The only reason I'd come to work that morning

was the promise I'd made to Mumford to give him the scoop on the bachelorette party. I needed to start carrying an extra set of clothes. The cute black tank top was okay, but the rest of my night-on-the-town outfit was not. These dark jeans were going to get hot real fast in the Alabama heat.

Mumford looked up like he'd just noticed me. He probably had. He was brilliant and could sink into his own mind, which made him not the most observant marble in the bag. He was the kind of guy who would walk off a cliff because he was too focused on catching all the Pokémon.

"An apocalypse is nigh."

"That's nice. Can you quit shouting?" I gingerly put my head down on my desk and reversed immediately in the hopes I could stave off puking. "The girls just dropped me off, and Mary Lou's bachelorette party involved a tequila fountain."

"I thought that was Friday?"

"It started Friday. It ended when Mary Lou stopped drinking long enough to remember she was missing her own wedding. I think we managed to get her there and we were only an hour or three late. The bridesmaids may or may not have been in attendance. Everything's hazy after the tequila fountain was brought out Saturday afternoon."

"I thought you were done with clear liquor?"

I groaned. "Apparently I needed the reminder. Please quit yelling."

Mumford sighed like a mom with a wayward toddler. Given his level of maturity clearly outranked mine, he was the defacto mom of the operation. "I'm about whispering, Whiskey."

"Sounds like you're shouting."

"His volume is quite low, considering his normal oafish tone."

In sync, we turned to the bunny cage. "Shut up, Elvis."

I heard it mumble something about disrespecting a powerful being of evil and chaos, but my head hurt too much for a snappy comeback.

"You need to focus."

"Tequila. Fountain. Asking me to focus right now is about as effective as asking Beth to plan a dry party."

“Wait, Beth planned the bachelorette party? Why’d you accept the invitation?”

I’d sworn off her parties after the last, when her idea of a quiet get-together turned out to include fifty people and a plastic baby pool of sangria. I groaned and ran my fingers through my hair, pulling back the long, dark-brown strands on the crown, pinkies grazing the sides I kept shaved. Most of the time my horns were hidden like retractable claws, but when I got angry, they came out the temperature of hellfire. The smell of burning hair isn’t pleasant. “I didn’t know Beth was in charge. It was Sue who invited me. I thought Sue organized it, but the hussy didn’t even have the grace to stick around for the tequila fountain.”

“What?”

I rubbed my temples. “She ran off with one of the groomsmen Friday night.”

“Oh no, not the one you were angling for?”

“Yes, that one. Hooker winked at me when she left. Winked! I hope he was bad in bed.”

He looked like he wanted to get more details but shook his head. “Focus, Whiskey! This is big.”

I tried to remember what was big and why I needed to focus. I gave it my best shot, staring at Mumford until there was almost just one of him. There was like, one-and-three-quarter Mumfords.

“What’s big?”

“The apocalypse!”

I winced.

“Now he’s yelling,” Elvis sang from the corner.

Like I needed the update.

“Oh, right. Apocalypse.”

“You’re not the least bit worried?” He moved from his desk to flop down on the dilapidated couch that sat against the wall. It had been a nice couch at one point, but now the supports didn’t support, and the cushions were flat. It ate half your body when you sat down. It was comfortable, but a bitch to get up from.

“Is there something special about this one? The apocalypse is always nigh, Mumford, Fred has no sense of subtlety, and stopping them is kind of our thing.” I dug around in my top desk drawer

for aspirin. No pain relievers, but I found a chocolate bar that had probably been hiding in the back for the better part of a year. I considered eating it anyway, but my stomach vetoed that idea right quick.

“Not *the* apocalypse, Whiskey, *an* apocalypse. As in, a specific one.”

“That’s different. Do we know which one?” I braced myself for some random, vague mystical bullshit containing the barest hint of a clue. Mumford, my best friend since I moved to Cautious, was that part of our two-person team. When I signed up to fight evil with The Powers That Be after my mom was murdered, I sort of skimmed the paperwork and put down his name in the “human conduit” field. He got the visions, and I ran down whatever was bad and took care of it. My job would be a lot easier if The Powers That Be—we’d named them Fred because it was easier—didn’t take special pleasure in making the visions as obscure as possible when handing out assignments. You’d think they’d be more straightforward in their goal to fight evil.

“War.”

“Wait, what?” I stopped rooting around in the very bottom drawer, the one nobody ever uses that collects dust bunnies and manila file folders stained with who-knows-what in a desperate last-ditch effort to find pain killers and gave him my full attention. “Just like that?”

He nodded and then winced. “Don’t get too excited. That’s about all I’ve got.” He used the higher, mocking voice he took on to tell me visions. “War is on his horse. He will arrive with the trappings of his role, and should the scale be tipped, he will settle over the land and call forth his brothers.”

I leaned back in my chair and rubbed my temples. “Well, shit.”