

A dark, atmospheric illustration of a hooded figure in a cemetery. The figure, with long black hair and a pale face, holds a bouquet of vibrant red roses. They stand in a narrow path between gnarled, ancient trees. In the background, a full moon glows through the branches, and the silhouettes of tombstones are visible. The overall color palette is dominated by deep blues, purples, and blacks, with the red roses providing a stark contrast.

A DATE WITH DEATH



◆ DEVIANT MAGIC ◆

BOOK
ONE

SCOTT COLBY

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DEVIANT MAGIC BOOK ONE: A DATE WITH DEATH

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Published by Outland Entertainment LLC

3119 Gillham Road

Kansas City, MO 64109

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ISBN: 978-1-947659-88-9

Worldwide Rights

Created in the United States of America

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Printed and bound in the United States of America.

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*This is a work of fiction.
Any resemblance to real people or places
is a low down dirty shame.
For best results, serve with a snifter
of strong brown liquor.*

— CHAPTER ONE —

Attention Harksburg! I have news of the utmost importance that shall—*hiccup!*—change the lives of all gathered here today!”

Kevin Felton unleashed a mighty sigh as Oscar climbed atop the slab of granite used as a pulpit whenever one of them had something important to say. The abandoned industrial park known locally as the Works had seen more than its fair share of drunken proclamations over the years, most of which were prefaced with similar promises of substance. Usually they turned out to be pretty stupid. Kevin didn't doubt that his dumb friend would perpetuate that trend. He just hoped he wouldn't be involved in whatever was about to come out of Oscar's mouth; it was Kevin's welcome back party, after all, which made him a target for all manner of bullshit.

Oscar paused to cast a benevolent gaze across all those gathered, sticklike arms spread wide and welcoming, his battered Cubs cap straighter and lower than usual. The young man's freckled face, scraggly red hair, and wide, toothy smile often reminded others of a cartoon character. In the flickering light of their unnecessarily large campfire, Kevin thought his friend looked rather like a redneck messiah come to lead the faithful to the holy trailer

park—complete with a 40-ounce bottle of Miller High Life duct taped to each hand.

“Get on with it, fucker,” Waltman growled. “All day you wouldn’t shut up about whatever dumb bullshit’s about to come out of your mouth. Hurry up and get it over with before the keg gets warm.”

Kevin glanced over his shoulder, trying to find Waltman in the crowd, but his friend was hidden somewhere in the gaggle of twenty-something men and women who’d come out for Kevin’s party. Although he couldn’t see Waltman, Kevin could easily picture the shit-eating grin on his beefy friend’s crooked, acne-pocked face.

Oscar took a quick swig from the half-empty bottle attached to his left hand, then scratched his scraggly red beard thoughtfully with the lip of the bottle. “Ah, Waltman,” he said softly, like a wise sitcom father trying to impart this week’s lesson to his foolish-yet-well-meaning son. “Long have you tried to prove your superiority over me. The beatings in gym class, the wedgies on the playground, the theft of my prom date, that skunk you locked in the cab of my truck last week...”

“Yeah, so you’re a fucking loser! Everybody knows that!” Waltman shouted, winning a chuckle from the thirty or so people gathered in the wooded outskirts of the Works. “Get to the damn point already!”

“Waltman,” Oscar said again. “Poor, pathetic, small-minded Waltman. It is I who is...am...are...is better than you, as you’ll soon see.” At that point, he nodded to Kevin. “Sorry to steal the limelight at your welcome back party, but...” He paused for dramatic effect, favoring those gathered with one more loving glance. “I, Oscar Spuddner, am *immortal!*”

A collective groan echoed through the crowd. Empty beer cans rained down on Oscar, who found it hard to protect himself with a bottle taped to each hand. A tallboy clanged off his forehead and

sent his cap flying. Kevin laughed under his breath. Some things never changed.

“Enjoying yourself yet?” Ren Roberts asked from his side. Kevin’s ride had been missing for the past hour or so, ostensibly providing that cute redhead from the next county over with a grand tour of his Jaguar’s backseat.

“Just like old times,” Kevin replied with a smile. He’d forgotten how much fun these benders out in the Works could be, but he never would’ve ruined his reputation as the aloof city boy by admitting it. “Yourself?”

Ren took a quick sip from his snifter of Glenlivet. “Oh, a little romp among the bourgeoisie is always good for the soul.” In his khakis, loafers, and blue velvet smoking jacket, Ren Roberts lent an air of melodramatic culture to the proceedings. His sandy blond hair, slicked back across his scalp with what must’ve been an entire bottle of gel, hadn’t moved in six years. Since graduating high school, Ren had been a bit of an enigma. A smart, personable young man from a wealthy family, he could’ve gone to his choice of universities, but he skipped college completely and instead operated as an online day trader working out of his parents’ home. That the one among them best equipped to leave Harksburg had never moved on was a topic of much whispered discussion among the locals. Some claimed that the only Roberts child suffered from a debilitating health condition that kept him living with his parents; others posited that there was a price on his head, that staying close to his powerful father somehow kept the wolves at bay. Oscar had even once suggested that Ren was an alien and the Roberts family’s sprawling estate concealed a buried mothership. For his part, Ren seemed to find his status as a town legend quaint and amusing.

As the heckling died down, a squeaky voice cut through the night. “Oscar’s telling the truth!” Doorknob shouted. “I seen it myself, right about ten this morning!” In the flickering firelight

from the huge bonfire, Kevin could see that Doorknob's face was a pasty shade of white that shouldn't have been possible after three hours of hard drinking. Impossible seemed to be the theme of Doorknob's body: he was far too thin to have such a round beer gut, several inches too short to have such a long torso, covered in too much red hair and dappled with too many freckles to supposedly be primarily of Middle Eastern ancestry. Nothing about Doorknob made much sense, least of all his nickname, which no one could remember the reason for.

Tom Flanagan strode forward out of the crowd, still wearing his blue uniform and sidearm, though his hat was on backwards and he was missing his left shoe. "As an officer of the law, I formally request that any witnesses to this morning's alleged miracle who have not spent the last twenty-seven years shoved up Mr. Spuddner's *be-hind* come forward immediately!"

Junior Mullins stepped forward, handed Tom his missing shoe, then disappeared back into the crowd.

"Case closed!" Tom shouted.

"This is serious!" Doorknob squealed.

"Allow me to explain," Oscar cooed, once again in messiah mode. "This revelation of revelations came to me not long after breakfast, following closely upon the heels of an extra cup of coffee and a long, satisfying piss. I joined young Master Knob at our usual place of meeting, behind Old Mac Hurkin's barn where the day's pile of hay awaited baling. Also aaaaa-waiting my presence was an unsteady p—*hiccup!*—pitchfork unaware of its impending role in revealing my destiny."

"Awww!" moaned Jim Jameson from his customary spot at Waltman's hip. "Did you and the pitchfork make love?"

A cheer rose up from the crowd. Tom Flanagan raised his missing shoe in the air and decried such man-tool relations as illegal. At Kevin's side, Ren washed down a groan with a sip of Glenlivet.

Oscar didn't miss a beat. "No, no. That pitchfork had much more devilish intentions—such as catching a stray breeze and tumbling straight through my heart!"

"So, you're saying you got some penetration?" Waltman hollered to the delight of the crowd.

Oscar grappled for the collar of his soiled Dale Earnhardt T-shirt, trying in vain to tear it free despite the bottles taped to his hands. Doorknob scrambled onto the ledge, took firm hold of Oscar's collar, and yanked. Though he failed to tear the shirt, he did succeed in awkwardly dumping the two of them off the back of the ledge in a tangle of sticklike arms and legs.

Another raucous cheer rose up from the ranks of Kevin's friends. He craned his neck back over each shoulder in turn to scan the crowd. Though he'd spent the first eighteen years of his life with most of this crew, he felt like an outsider. Four years away at school in Chicago and then three years in the workforce had effectively removed him from the group. He'd become a friend emeritus, a former member who only appeared for important occasions or at events where the free food promised to be good. Though Kevin was damn proud of the fact that he'd moved on to a new life, the realization that they'd all done the same was downright jarring. Both sides of the equation looked at each other with something akin to suspicion; neither quite understood why the sudden separation had ended or why things weren't the way they used to be. Regardless, the people gathered in the Works were Kevin's oldest friends and he was glad they'd come out to see him.

"He hasn't taken that damn shirt off in years. What made him think it would come off now?" Jenny Reilly said sagely from her perch atop the rusted bulldozer on the edge of their little circle. No one was quite sure what it was doing abandoned so far from the main buildings of the Works, but it was a great place to sit so none of them really cared. Jenny, a former cheerleader and valedictorian of the Harksburg High Class of 2002, reminded Kevin of

the machine on which she sat: lopsided, falling apart, and mostly useless—a faded memory of better days. Despite the rough years, her blond hair, blue eyes, and confident smile still attracted plenty of gentlemanly attention.

“Normally when those two make out they do it with all of their clothes on,” Jim Jameson added with a proud belch. Waltman’s second was a shorter version of his taller friend, broad and strong without definition, clad in dirty jeans and his favorite sleeveless flannel shirt. “Buttons and zippers are soooooooooooooo hard!”

Everybody but Kevin laughed. Something about this didn’t feel right. The fall wasn’t a long one. Oscar and Doorknob should’ve popped right back up, red-faced and chagrined, weakly attempting to deflect the jokes and jibes raining down upon them.

He tapped Ren on the arm. “We should go check on them.”

“Lead the way.”

The scene they found on the other side of the granite ledge made Kevin gag and Ren turn away. Oscar had landed on his back, arms and legs spread, the four tines of a pitchfork sticking up through his chest in a spreading puddle of blood. His eyes were glassy and still. Both of his bottles of beer had shattered on the way down. Beside him was a tangle of arms and legs that used to be Doorknob, his neck twisted at an impossible angle.

“Flanagan!” Kevin shouted. He put his face in his hands, fighting the urge to sob.

The crowd surged forward en masse. Gasps and retches and exclamations of sadness and disgust echoed through the Works as Kevin’s friends made a rough circle around the two corpses. Flanagan shoved his way through Waltman and Jim Jameson and knelt beside Doorknob. “Well,” he slurred, trying to sound officious. “What the hell were the chances of *that*?”

“Shouldn’t have brought the pitchfork,” Waltman added glumly. No one laughed.

Kevin rolled his eyes. "Flanagan, shouldn't you be calling for an ambulance?"

"Don't bother," Oscar said. The crowd gasped as he sat up, extricating himself from the pitchfork's gory tines. He plucked away a red, stringy piece of meat from the abused tool and examined it closely like a four-year-old investigating something he'd just pulled out of his nose. "That fucking stung." The hunk of flesh then crawled inchworm style down his finger, across his forearm, and disappeared inside the sleeve of his shirt.

"Tell me about it," Doorknob added, pulling himself to his feet and rubbing the back of his neck. Something popped ominously in the base of his skull. He glanced down at the bubbling puddle of cheap booze and blood at Oscar's feet. "Looks like cherry soda!"

Those gathered watched in slack-jawed amazement as the liquid slowly lost its red hue. It was as if Oscar's bare feet absorbed his blood but left the beer behind. Oscar, Kevin was sure, probably wished he'd been able to save the beer, too.

"The fuck?" Jenny asked. Beside her, Jim Jameson fainted. Kevin seconded Jenny's sentiment with a nervous nod. He'd never been so relieved and so confused in his life.

"I feel like I should arrest the both of you for obstruction of justice," Flanagan said angrily. "That there was a murder-suicide, but now there's no fucking evidence. Don't do it again."

Oscar scrambled awkwardly to his feet. He paused to gaze wistfully at the remains of the shattered bottles still taped to his hands. "As I was saying," he declared proudly, "I, Oscar Spuddner, am immortal. And my power has spread to my bosom-est of buddies, Master Knob. You, too, can cheat death by pledging your love and support to my cause."

"Fuck you," Waltman spat. "Do it again and I'll think about it."

"Take your shirt off," Jim Jameson goaded. "Prove this wasn't some kind of trick."

With his fingers finally free, Oscar succeeded in yanking his dirty T-shirt up over his head. Underneath, his blood-stained chest and stomach were pocked with light red sores clumped in groups of four. The crowd gasped once more.

"You tested it a few times," Ren said as he took a nervous sip of scotch.

"Duh," Oscar replied haughtily. "It may have taken me three years to finish eighth grade, but I'm not stupid enough to do something like this in front of you assholes unless I know it's gonna work."

Kevin stealthily excused himself from the ensuing drunken argument, ducking into the nearby woods. He couldn't keep himself from shaking. What the hell had he just seen? Reaching into his jacket pocket, he withdrew his smartphone and checked for a signal. Checking the score of the Cubs game—they were out on the West Coast, in Los Angeles or maybe San Francisco—would help him calm down.

"This is all your fault, you know."

He whirled to his left to face the unfamiliar voice. A short man in a long black overcoat leaned against a nearby tree, appraising Kevin with a scowl through a pair of slender spectacles. The tops of his ears ended in pointed tips on either side of his dark, close-cropped hair. "Your fault." He pointed at Kevin angrily for added emphasis, his handsome face twisted in an accusing sneer.

Before Kevin could react, the man disappeared. He simply faded away, melting into the shadows as if he were one of them.

Had Kevin just seen a ghost or some sort of stress-induced hallucination? Things just kept getting worse. First, he'd lost his job in Chicago with Noonan, Noonan, and Schmidt when the Griffin Group bought out the once-prosperous firm. His girlfriend, Kylie, ditched him for a man twice his age. With no money and no luck finding new employment, he'd done something he'd sworn he'd never do: give up his apartment in the city and move back to

his mother's Harksburg home. Finally, at a party celebrating his return, Kevin had watched two of his oldest friends die and come back to life, only to be informed that he was the one ultimately responsible for whatever was going on.

It was too much to process. "Fuck this," he growled, spitting in the general direction of the mysterious messenger. Shoving his phone back into his pocket, Kevin hurried to rejoin his friends and find some strong liquor.