



SHOTGUN

◆ DEVIANT MAGIC ◆

BOOK
TWO

SCOTT COLBY

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DEVIANT MAGIC BOOK TWO: SHOTGUN

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Published by Outland Entertainment LLC

3119 Gillham Road

Kansas City, MO 64109

Founder/Creative Director: Jeremy D. Mohler

Editor-in-Chief: Alana Joli Abbott

ISBN: 978-1-954255-01-2

EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-947659-92-6

Worldwide Rights

Created in the United States of America

Editor: Gwendolyn N. Nix

Cover Illustration: Ann Marie Cochran

Cover Design: Jeremy D. Mohler

Interior Layout: Mikael Brodu

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Printed and bound in the United States of America.

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*This is a work of fiction.
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or places is all in your head.
For best results, serve with a can
of local craft beer.*

— CHAPTER ONE —

How would you like to help me change the world?"

Roger had never confronted a burglar before, but he was pretty sure no trespasser in the history of time had ever answered the question "What the hell are you doing in my house?" in quite that way.

The intruder leaned forward from her perch among the empty takeout containers piled high atop his kitchen counter, her black dress rustling against the tile. She was a long, spindly thing, her porcelain skin made even whiter by the long locks of jet-black hair framing her face. "Come on, Roger," she cooed. "I know you've got a good heart. I know you want to help people." How did she know his name? He'd certainly never met her before. Roger shifted his grip on his old shotgun and took a couple tentative steps closer. His slippers squeaked on the cracked linoleum. They were only a few feet apart now. "Who are you and what are you doing in my house?" he asked, fighting to keep his voice stern and mostly succeeding. Although the sickly-sweet smile with which she'd greeted him remained, she clicked her black nails across the counter in irritation. "Roger, this isn't about me. This is about you. Are you interested or not?"

"No," he croaked. He never should've come downstairs to investigate that strange, childish laughter. He should've stayed in bed, rolled over, pulled the covers over his face, and pretended nothing was happening.

The tall woman's smile faded and she shook her head. "Are you sure?" She pouted, staring out at him from under her bangs with eyes suddenly gone soft. It was exactly the way Roger's daughter looked at him when she wanted something.

He hesitated before answering. Was this some sort of test? Would things turn nasty if she didn't like his response? "I'm sure," he finally said.

She lowered herself to the kitchen floor like a snake slithering down a tree. Roger stood frozen in place as she confidently closed the gap between them. She took his hand gently in her own and led him into the hallway. He didn't fight it; he couldn't, not because he was afraid, but because her icy touch somehow put him completely at ease. They stopped before the big round mirror Roger's wife often used to check her appearance before leaving for work. Not once did the strange woman so much as glance at his shotgun.

"See how good we look together?" she hissed. "Just the two of us against the world."

What Roger saw was a gorgeous young woman making a man in his late thirties look even older than he felt. She made his brown hair seem grayer and thinner, the crow's feet by his blue eyes the size of railroad tracks, his lean build fat and sloppy, his firm jaw a trio of jiggling jowls. And her simple but elegant dress made his flannel robe and fur slippers look positively stupid.

"Roger," she cooed, turning his face so her shimmering red lips were less than an inch from his chin, "don't tell me you've never wanted to be something. Where's your ambition?" She capped that last sentence with an impetuous giggle.

His heart broke all over again. Those were the last words Virginia had said to him before she drove off with the kids six

months ago, taking them to some mysterious new suitor who could better provide the kind of lifestyle she needed. Food and a roof bought with a high school janitor's salary had been more than enough for twenty years. Roger hadn't seen her change of heart coming, and he still couldn't figure out what had caused it.

But whereas Virginia had immediately swung herself into the car and peeled out of the driveway, the strange woman in his kitchen appeared to be waiting anxiously for an answer. Once again, he felt as if he were being tested. Had she been spying on his family? Had she watched his wife abandon him? The answers to those questions were obvious, he decided, and downright chilling—not to mention thoroughly confusing. How the heck was he supposed to help her change the world? He could barely change the ink in his printer.

It was all a trick. It had to be. She'd come to the kitchen to distract him, to mess with his head, to distract him or set him up or otherwise take advantage of him. Roger lowered his eyes to avoid her intense stare. He opened his mouth to demand that she leave, but the words wouldn't come. Opportunity loomed before him. No, more than that—a second chance. A chance to properly answer the question that had been torturing his days and his nights ever since it was first asked of him. Maybe doing so would give him some peace. So where *was* his ambition?

"I did what I had to do," he said, his voice quivering. Roger didn't explain how he could've been a baseball player. Scouts from seven different major league teams watched every game he'd played in his senior year. Consensus pegged him as a good-but-not-great prospect, a solid bench player at worst and a decent regular at best. But then Virginia had gotten pregnant, and the idea of being on the road while she raised their first child alone hadn't been one he could stomach. That jagged hole in his heart where his family had always lived began to throb. He closed his eyes, wishing even more that this damn woman would just go away.

The back of a cold hand caressed his cheek, sending a shiver down his spine. "If you ever feel the need to be more," the woman whispered, her breath hot in his ear, "just look in the silverware drawer."

When he opened his eyes, she was gone. Roger abandoned all pretense of calm or bravery, dashing immediately to the back door beside the refrigerator. It was still locked, as was the tiny window above the sink. He sprinted into the living room, vaulting the mess of old photo albums and empty beer bottles he'd left scattered across the fraying carpet, and tested each of the three bay windows. Locked, locked, and locked. The deadbolt on the front door was shut tight. The windows in the bathroom and the dining room were similarly secured. She couldn't have come in through the basement; the iron bolt on that door could only be opened from inside the house.

He retraced his footsteps through every room on the first floor, searching for things that had been taken. Nothing was missing. The mortgage and his family's birth certificates and Social Security cards were still in the safe under the bookshelf. Nothing was missing from Virginia's jewelry box in the bathroom—not that she'd left much of value. The old green rug in the hall, which usually held footprints for days, showed no sign of tracks smaller than his own. The counter from which the woman had teased him showed no evidence she'd ever been there.

Which left the silverware drawer. Roger stared at it in absolute terror for a few minutes before a small laugh squeaked through his lips. He'd been sleepwalking—that was it. Wouldn't be the first time. After all, what could such a strange woman possibly have wanted with him? And how could she have broken into his locked-up house and then disappeared without a trace? It had been a dream, he decided, a manifestation of his stress and loneliness and perhaps a subconscious need for the approval of an attractive woman. That last part made him feel kind of gross.

He looked down at his shotgun and sighed, thinking how lucky he was that he never kept it loaded. Sleepwalking was dangerous enough; sleepwalking with a loaded weapon in his hands was something he didn't want to think about. He flipped the chamber open, relieved to see that it was still empty.

Roger headed for the stairs and his bedroom, telling himself that the drawer wasn't worth investigating. He wasn't a child who couldn't sleep unless someone checked the closet for monsters. The thought made his heart ache, even though neither Samantha nor Ricky had asked him to do that in years. One night, when his daughter was just four, he decided it would be entertaining to pretend like he'd actually found something. Sam spent the next week sleeping between Roger and Virginia.

The stairs squeaked in protest against his heavy, plodding footsteps. Worn out from his frenzied inspection of the house, he fought to keep his eyes open as sleep tried to reclaim him. A good night's rest, he knew, would go a long way toward helping him put this night behind him. Roger reached the second floor and turned left toward the master bedroom. He stopped in front of Ricky's room to check on his son—then remembered yet again that the little guy was gone. Roger shook his head and stumbled on, wondering if he'd ever break that habit.

He was about to open the door to the master bedroom when a low, guttural snarl stopped him in his tracks. Wood squealed as a dresser drawer was yanked open. Fabric swished as someone rummaged through his clothing.

"Here somewhere," hissed a scratchy, serpentine voice. "Must find it!"

Roger peered around the door, which he'd left slightly ajar. In the darkness, he could just discern a bulky, humanoid shape tearing apart the dresser beside his bed. Moonlight streaming through the window beyond glinted off a scaly hide. Wide hips and a proportionally narrower waist revealed the burglar to be a

woman. Roger guessed she was about six and a half feet tall and over 250 pounds—more than big enough to wipe the floor with him. *That's a leather jacket*, he thought. *She's one of those assholes from the biker bar up the highway*. He wondered if his previous sleepwalking dream had been a subconscious warning of some sort or if he were still stuck in the same nightmare. Either way, the meager courage he'd shown in confronting the spindly woman in his dream wasn't enough to make him want to risk dealing with someone larger and probably better armed. A quick call to 9-1-1 would solve this problem. He slowly backed away from the door, his heart pounding in his chest.

In the bedroom, old hinges squealed in protest as the intruder turned her attention to the closet. Roger shook his head at the unintelligible muttering that accompanied the flutter of clothing being tossed every which way. *Drugs*, he thought.

Halfway to the stairs, a sharp corner jabbed his kidney. He spun and righted the table he'd backed into, but the framed photographs it so proudly displayed tumbled to the floor. Roger watched in horror as Virginia, Ricky, Samantha, and their trip to Cape Cod betrayed him in a cacophony of shattering glass and wood.

The sounds coming from the bedroom ceased. Roger raised his shotgun and took aim at the door. The old twelve gauge was a fearsome weapon and there was no way for the intruder to know it wasn't loaded. Roger hoped he'd have the confidence to pull off the deception. He'd never had a particularly good poker face.

Heavy footsteps thudded across the floorboards as the intruder approached the bedroom door. Roger fought the urge to wipe the sweat from his brow, knowing he'd have to make the first move.

The top of the door exploded in a shower of wood and smoke. A ball of flame zipped over Roger's shoulder, colliding with the far wall and setting it ablaze. Three red eyes glared from the master bedroom. The thought of being brave ran screaming from Roger's mind just as quickly as his bladder emptied into his pajamas.

A hissing laugh followed close behind as he scrambled for the stairs and slid over the top step. He grabbed at the railing to try to right himself, which threw off his momentum, and he wound up tumbling down to the first floor. His useless weapon flew from his hands, bounced off the walls a few times, and disappeared around the corner, sliding in the general direction of the front door. Roger grunted as he collided with the opposite wall at the bottom of the stairs. Leaning heavily against the wall, he groaned at the pain in his ribs and back as he hauled himself to his feet. He needed to get to the phone in the family room so he could call the police and the fire department and—

The cold tingle of something metallic and sharp pressing itself to his throat extinguished his thoughts. “Do not move,” said a male voice to Roger’s left. “Tell me what you saw up there.”

Roger took a deep breath, trying to slow his pulse so his quivering carotid wouldn’t slice itself open on the blade. “I don’t know. It had red eyes, and it spat fire...and I think it had scales.”

“I thought so. You’ve just survived an encounter with one of the most dangerous creatures in the Western Hemisphere,” the man explained slowly, as if giving a lecture. “That creature is looking for something very important. She knows it’s somewhere in your home, but her limited ESP cannot narrow the search further. If we find what she’s looking for first, we get to keep our lives. If we don’t...”

Time seemed to freeze as terrible realization dawned on Roger. “It’s in the kitchen,” he said quickly. Smoke tickled his nose, reminding him of his other immediate problem. “And my house is on fire.”

The blade pulled away. “Show me.”

Roger nodded and turned toward the kitchen, risking a quick glance at this latest intruder. The man was tall and lean and clothed in black military fatigues. A pair of green eyes burned brightly between high cheekbones and a tight brown crew cut. His posture was stiff and straight, his pace steady and purposeful.

Military, Roger thought, *maybe Special Forces*. He carried a pair of wicked-looking blades, like Bowie knives with bigger guards. The tops of his ears ended in sharp points. Although he didn't seem like he wanted to do Roger any harm, he certainly looked capable of doing so if the mood struck.

Roger flicked a switch on the wall as he shuffled into the kitchen, bathing the room in harsh fluorescent light. He stopped just shy of the cabinets, deeply frightened of whatever was in his silverware drawer. Turning to face the pointy-eared man, Roger spoke in a sad, quivering voice. "Top drawer, to the right of the dishwasher."

"Thank you," the commando replied politely. He stowed his blades in sheaths at his hips and yanked the drawer open.

A golden globe of roiling energy, like a miniature sun, rose up from within the drawer. Thin tendrils of power flared outward from its surface and crashed back down in blinding arcs. Roger stared at it in awe as it continued to rise until it hovered just below the kitchen ceiling. He had no idea what he was looking at, but something told him it was as important as the pointy-eared man claimed.

And then the globe suddenly zipped away from them and streaked down the hallway. It came to an abrupt stop above Roger's shotgun and then lowered itself into the weapon, melted into the steel of the barrels and the wood of the stock, and disappeared.

Jaw agape, Roger turned to the pointy-eared man in search of an answer—but the other merely shrugged. "That certainly wasn't the way this was supposed to go—"

Before he could continue, the ceiling above him exploded downward in a torrent of shattered drywall and lumber. Roger dropped to the floor and covered his head with his arms, cringing as shrapnel pelted his back, coughing against the scratchy dust that filled his mouth and nose. He wondered if the pointy-eared man was all right—not out of any concern for the man's well-being, but because he didn't like the thought of facing the thing in his bedroom alone.

As the dust began to clear, something heavy landed behind him with a dull thud. A predatory snarl sent a tremor through Roger's soul. He was on his feet without thinking, racing down the hall toward the empty weapon he assumed was his only chance. That ball of plasma in the silverware drawer had to have done something to it. Hot smoke streaming down from the fire upstairs burned his eyes and lungs, but he pressed onward. The creature's footsteps followed him like a shadow.

He dove for the hazy shape he thought was his shotgun, gasping as his damaged ribs protested their collision with the hard oak floor. His hands scrabbled across that floor, searching, searching—had the shape just been an illusion of the smoke? —and then his fingers found purchase on the familiar wood of the shotgun's worn stock. He rolled onto his back and brought his weapon to bear on the dark form and the red eyes pouncing upon him, and something in the back of his mind, something he swore came from the weapon itself, told him to pull both triggers.

The smoky room was suddenly and violently illuminated as his shotgun kicked hard into his shoulder. The report was like thunder as a thick ball of blue flame exploded from both barrels. For a brief moment, he could clearly discern the reptilian features of his attacker—bronze scales rippling across a vaguely feminine form, a long snout, a ferocious mouth lined with razor-sharp fangs, a spiky crest of exposed bone where her hair should've been—and then the blue fire slammed into the creature's chest and hurled her back into the kitchen.

Roger dismissed his shock with a quick shake of his head. His home was on fire, and he had to get out before the entire place burned down. He darted for the front door and yanked it open, hoping the creature he'd shot was good and dead and not about to jump him from behind. A dozen scrambling paces later he collapsed on the frozen ground of his front lawn and turned to watch the fire take his small home. The flames roared into the night, hiding the

moon and stars behind a curtain of evil black smoke. The harsh siren of a fire truck blared in the distance, but Roger knew there was no hope. He'd lost everything—his family, his home, his every possession except his pee-stained pajamas and the old shotgun in his lap. His lip quivered with rage. Somehow, he knew this was all that strange woman's fault.

Glass shattered as a dark shape crashed through one of the windows on the side of his house. Roger leapt to his feet, weapon ready. It had worked once without any ammunition, so he assumed it would again.

The pointy-eared man stood and dusted himself off, smiling gently. "You've nothing to fear from me, friend," he said with a cough. "That was excellent work."

Roger kept his shotgun trained on the man. "What the hell is going on?" he demanded.

"I'm afraid an otherwise secret affair has spilled painfully out into the public," the man said, casually strolling closer. He glanced at the burning home sadly. "I apologize for the damage."

"You apologize for the damage?" Roger was incredulous. "Tell me what the hell is going on or I'm going to blow your head off!"

The man sighed and stuck his hands in his pockets. He stopped his approach mere inches from the barrel of Roger's weapon.

"Though I'm ashamed to say it, I really don't know why this is happening. My name is Aeris. If you come with me, maybe we can find out."

"I'm not going anywhere—"

Aeris's right hand jerked upward from his pocket and unleashed a handful of silver dust in Roger's face. Roger gasped and turned away, but he inhaled a mouthful of the stuff. It tasted like burnt bread. The world around him spun and went black, and the last thing he remembered as he collapsed was a pointy-eared man slowly prying his shotgun from his paralyzed hands.