

To Hell in a Handbasket

Halos & Horns Book 3: To Hell in a Handbasket

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Amber Book Company LLC

www.AmberBookCompany.com

U.S.A.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2012943523

To Hell in a Handbasket / Keith B. Darrell

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First edition published 2012. Second edition published 2013. Third edition published 2014. Printed and bound in the United States of America.

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17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5

ISBN 978-1-935971-12-2

Amazon Edition • May 2014

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Interlude:

A Christmas Carol

CHRISTMAS EVE, ELEVEN YEARS AGO:

In most places, Christmas is marked by the arrival of bright lights and festivities, but by that standard, every day was Christmas in Vegas. Officer Mordecai strolled hand in hand with his eight-year-old daughter Sharon, pointing out the green garland wreaths and street corner Santas, attempting to explain what made this time of year special. “It’s not just the decorations,” he said.

Sharon grinned like a Cheshire cat. “I know. There are presents, too!”

Mordecai smiled at the thought of the pricey dollhouse he had spent the previous night gift-wrapping and placing besides the other presents under the garishly ornamented Christmas tree. Then, he remembered the menorah on the mantel and ruminated on the true meaning of the holidays. “This season is a time of good will toward all men.” Mordecai walked these

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streets every night on his beat, but they always appeared kinder and gentler on Christmas Eve. It seemed even criminals kept one night a year holy. The sound of carolers singing *Silent Night* followed them, as they approached a familiar alley, and Mordecai peered in. The old man and woman were sitting atop wooden crates, sharing a bottle of rum. He had seen them on his beat for as long as he could remember. "Good will toward all," he repeated, leading Sharon into the alley.

The old man looked up and greeted him. "Merry Christmas, Officer Mordecai."

"Merry Christmas, Callaghan, Maudie," Mordecai replied.

Maudie wrapped her shawl around her. "And who's this little Christmas angel with you, Officer?"

Mordecai beamed. "This is my little girl, Sharon. Say hello to Callaghan and Maudie, Sharon."

Sharon hugged her father's leg. "Hello Mister Callaghan, Miss Maudie."

"Ain't she adorable?" Maudie leaned forward and pinched Sharon's cheek.

"Indubitably," Callaghan replied. "You are indeed a fortunate man, Officer Mordecai."

Mordecai gazed around the alley that served as the couple's home. The Christmas lights strung along the main street illuminated it with a chiaroscuro effect. "Yes, very fortunate," he agreed. He pulled out his wallet and handed Callaghan several bills, hoping to provide a small degree of succor. "Buy the missus a nice dinner on me."

"You're too kind." Maudie observed Callaghan, as the impecunious vampire shoved the bills inside the pocket of his tattered coat. "Ain't he a kind one, hun?"

"Salt of the Earth," Callaghan replied. "But then, Officer Mordecai's always done right by us."

A woman's shrill scream pierced the night air, causing the carolers to pause their tune. Mordecai knelt to eye level with

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Sharon. "Stay here, princess." He glanced up at Callaghan. "Will you keep an eye on her?"

"Rest assured, Officer, she couldn't be in safer hands," Callaghan replied.

"Do what Callaghan and Maudie tell you. And don't leave the alley. I'll be back soon." Mordecai reached into his coat, pulled his revolver from its holster, and headed toward the scream. His thoughts raced with him, as he covered the two and a half blocks that separated him from the woman's cries. He was glad he had had the foresight to carry his own gun while off duty. Mordecai was used to patrolling this neighborhood, but this time there would be no way to call in for backup. At least, Sharon was safe with Callaghan and Maudie, Mordecai thought. They may have been down on their luck, but they had always seemed a kind couple in the years he'd spent on the beat.

"Let go of the damn purse, bitch!" The shout came from across the street.

Mordecai turned in the direction of the man's voice and darted across the road. He saw the mugger attempting to snatch a purse from a woman sprawled beneath his feet. "Police! Hit the ground."

Spotting Mordecai brandishing a revolver and heading toward him, the assailant released the purse strap and fled. Mordecai helped the woman to her feet. She gazed up at him through a battered eye, and he recognized her.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"What the hell do you think? Son of a bitch punched me in the face."

Mordecai pulled her hand away from her eye. "You'll have a shiner in the morning. You should've let him take your purse."

She shook her head. "He's just some junkie. Caught me by surprise, is all. I've dealt with johns rougher than him."

"Was he after your cash or your stash?"

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The woman didn't answer. "Thanks, Mordecai. You've done your boy scout deed for the day, so you can go now."

He shook his head. "You may have a concussion. I'll walk you back to your place."

"I'm fine. I don't need a nursemaid."

"Your apartment's only three blocks from here. Besides, the punk may still be around, waiting for me to leave."

She gazed about and nodded. "Suit yourself. But I ain't giving it away, even if you did help me."

"You know I've been married for ten years," he replied, as they walked down the street.

"So? Almost all my customers are married." She shook her head. "You really are a boy scout beneath that gruff exterior. Tell me the truth — you never considered stopping by for a quickie — for old time's sake?"

"I love my wife." Mordecai touched her face. "You'd better put some ice on that before it swells."

They climbed the steps to her porch. The woman fumbled through her purse for her key. Mordecai followed her inside the dilapidated apartment. Unwashed dishes sat in the sink, and stale bread lay on the kitchen counter. A scrawny, pitiful excuse for a Christmas tree sought refuge in the corner of the living room. Beneath it lay a teenage girl, reading a book in the dim light. She looked up as they entered. The girl leaped to her feet and rushed toward him. "Uncle Mordecai!" she called out excitedly.

Mordecai lifted her up and she gave him an effusive hug. The woman walked into the kitchen, lit a cigarette, and poured herself a shot of whiskey.

Mordecai reached into his pocket and handed the girl a coin.

The sanguine teen smiled. "You always have a shiny half-dollar coin for me, Uncle Mordecai." She kissed his cheek and dashed off to her bedroom.

"Thanks," the sallow woman grunted to Mordecai, puffing on her cigarette.

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He let the surrounding squalor soak in. “I’ve never seen a Christmas tree without presents under it.”

She took a drag from her cigarette. “It was either presents or the tree. Besides, Monica’s fourteen, now; she’s too old for presents.” She gulped down the whiskey and poured another shot.

Mordecai made a moue and followed the girl into her bedroom. He watched her slipping the coin into the lining of her shoe.

Once she realized she was being observed, she flashed a sheepish grin. “I hide my coins until I can take them to school and store them in my locker. Whenever my mother is jonesing, my coins aren’t safe at home.” She pointed to a ceramic piggy bank with protruding jagged pieces that had been glued back together. “If she needs a fix, she’ll tear the couch apart looking for any change in the cushions.”

“I didn’t realize drugs were that cheap.”

The girl grimaced. “She barter to make up the difference.”

Mordecai sighed. “So, you’re keeping your money in your school locker? What are you saving up to buy?” He thought of the dollhouse he’d bought for Sharon. It had set him back a pretty penny, but he imagined how it would look in his little princess’ bedroom. He glanced around Monica’s bedroom and it struck him the room seemed so drab because it lacked the dolls and stuffed animals a girl’s bedroom should have.

“I’m saving up so when I turn eighteen, I’ll have enough money to move out.”

Mordecai swallowed hard. He reached for his wallet and glanced at the remainder of his Christmas bonus. He fished out a hundred-dollar bill and handed it to her. “Don’t let your mother see it. Put it with your coins in your locker.”

While Monica hid the bill, Mordecai returned to the living room and berated the girl’s mother. “Look at yourself — selling yourself on the street, drinking, and doing drugs. Don’t you have any self-respect left?”

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She puffed on her cigarette. "You're a hypocrite, Officer Mordecai. I never heard you complaining about my whoring when you first met me; rather enjoyed it, as I recall."

Chastened, Mordecai looked away. "If you want to drag yourself into the gutter, it's none of my business; but you should do a better job caring for your daughter. She looks like she's been raised as a street urchin. At least, buy her some new clothes."

She poured more whiskey into her glass. "It's hard to be a single mother; there's never enough money."

"Don't feed me that disingenuous crap, like I'm some naïve social worker. What happens to all the money you make on the street?" Mordecai charged into the kitchen, slid open a drawer, and pulled out a packet of heroin. He held up the ersatz nepenthe. "You never change, do you? Still keep it in the same place. Jesus, the girl could find it!"

She grabbed the packet from him, and snapped, "If you're that concerned about her, then you could give me some money for her. After all, she is your daughter, too."

Mordecai appeared remorseful, as he turned away.

"Struck a nerve, did I?" She tossed the heroin back into the drawer. "Don't worry," she said in a subdued tone, "I won't blab to your missus and I ain't asking for nothing."

"I've given you plenty of money over the years, but the girl never sees it — this is where it ends up." He slammed the drawer.

She sat taciturn at the kitchen table, nursing her whiskey.

"I'm going to say goodbye to Monica." Mordecai stepped out of the kitchen and walked back to the girl's bedroom.

Monica was sitting on the bed. "I'll bring the bill to school when Christmas break ends and put it in the big coin jar in my locker. It'll be safe there, hidden beneath the coins. You know, Uncle Mordecai, the kids at school tease me about keeping a coin jar filled with Kennedy half-dollars; some of them have even nicknamed me Kennedy."

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Mordecai ran his hand through her blonde hair and promised to bring her more hundred-dollar bills. "Maybe if you fill your jar with C-notes, they'll call you Franklin."

Monica laughed. "I've gotten used to being Kennedy." She hugged her "Uncle" Mordecai goodbye.

Mordecai closed the bedroom door behind him. He gazed around the squalid apartment and his eyes fell on the barren Christmas tree. He glanced at the battered junkie — finding warmth and companionship in a bottle of whiskey between tricks — and let himself out the front door. He had his own thoughts for companionship, as he retraced his steps the five blocks back to the alley. Mordecai found Callaghan and Maudie entertaining Sharon with Christmas stories. He thanked them for looking after her.

Maudie grinned, and her fangs showed for the briefest of instants. "It was delightful to have a little girl to share our Christmas." She wrapped her tattered shawl around her shoulders, folding it upon itself to cover the holes in it.

"Maudie and I appreciate your kindness over the years, Officer Mordecai," Callaghan added. "We were happy for the opportunity to repay the favor."

Mordecai took Sharon by the hand and led her down the street.

"Daddy, Mister Callaghan and Miss Maudie have funny teeth."

Mordecai bent to eye level with Sharon. "It's impolite to point out other people's shortcomings or appearances," he admonished. "Not everyone is as fortunate as you are. Sometimes good people live on the streets and bad people live in nice houses."

Sharon looked up at her father. "Daddy, will I ever end up like the couple in the alley with the funny teeth?"

Mordecai hugged her. "You're my little princess, sweetheart. I'll never let you end up like that."

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Sharon wrapped her small arms around him. “You’re the best daddy in the whole wide world!”

Mordecai held her tightly, and turned to face the road he had come from, wishing it were true.

Chapter 4

Strange Bedfellows

SÍOFRA STARED AT THE COLORFUL kimono she found herself draped in. The traditional Japanese robe fell to her ankles, making it cumbersome to walk. *Someone will suffer for this indignity*, she swore.

“Isn’t it beautiful” Kaya gushed. “Mother picked it out at the market stalls in the village especially for you.” The sanguine child beamed. “It was my idea.”

“Of course it was,” Síoфра muttered. She realized she had to appease the girl and her mother for as long as she was in hiding in this strange land. She pondered the irony of a cruel, nasty changeling forced to seek sanctuary with such an innocent, sheltered girl.

“Let me tie the obi behind your kimono for you. I’ve always wanted a friend to play dress-up with. We have lots of old books with pictures of girls in their pretty kimonos, but it’s not the same as having another girl here in my bedroom.” Kaya paused. “Sometimes... sometimes, it can be very lonely.”

Síoфра cocked her head. “Ya’ve never been tae the village? Ya’ve spent yar entire life in this wee farmhouse?”

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Kaya nodded. "Except for when that nasty lady captured me in the garden and took me to that awful place where I met you and the nice kyuketsuki, Artemus. I liked him. You and Artemus were my first friends."

"Um, yeah. Right." *Poor kid*, Síoфра thought, *if a bloodsucking leech and I are her only friends*. "Sae what dae ya dae for fun here?"

"There's not much time for that. Usually, I help Mother with the chores around the farmhouse, and when she goes to the shed behind the barn to make pottery to sell in the village, I study my lessons."

"Chores? Lessons? I was asking about fun."

Kaya thought. "I do have a television. And we have so many books that Mother brings back from the village for me. You can read any of them you want."

"It sounds like the action is in this village ya keep mentioning. That's what I want tae see. Let's gae have some craic. Show me the way."

Kaya gasped. "I can't go to the village! Mother has forbidden—"

"Which is exactly why ya should," the changeling replied. "Life is meant tae be lived, nae spent sheltered away in some hole."

"But Mother says it's not safe for me. What if we meet bad people?"

Síoфра grinned. "I'm a changeling; yar already with bad people. I'm likely worse than any we'll come across."

"But Mother —"

"—will nae ken. Besides, ya'll be safe with me. What could gae wrong?"

Kaya ruminated. "I have always wondered what the village is like. Mother has described it to me, but it would be exciting to see it for myself."

"Aye, we'll have a grand time. Anything would be more exciting than being stuck here."

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Kaya whispered, "All right, I'll do it. But first, you must help me with my chores. In the afternoon, when Mother has finished her chores, she will work in the pottery shed until nightfall. We can slip out then. There's a path through the forest leading to the village."

Síofra found the morning chores at the farmhouse torturous but the afternoon came soon enough. Having espied Amaya entering the barn, she raced to Kaya. "Tis time."

Kaya peeked out from behind a tattered textbook and pointed to a sheet of paper on her escritoire. "I still have a dozen questions to answer."

The changeling snatched the paper and crumpled it, tossing it into the fireplace. "Nae anymore. Come on; let's gae."

"That wasn't nice," the younger girl replied.

Her insouciant companion shrugged. "Sae, where's the path tae the village?"

Kaya led the changeling outside to the edge of the forest. "We must return before tosogare."

"Tosogare?"

"The darkness. The forest can be dangerous at night."

Síofra blinked, and when her eyelids opened, her irises had changed from black to bright red. "Dae nae worry; I can see in the dark."

The vivacious child grinned. "Cool! Can all changelings do that?" Kaya asked, leading the way down the path.

Síofra blinked again, returning her crimson eyes to normal. "There are certain traits all changelings share. But each changeling takes on the attributes of its doppelganger."

"What are attributes and doppel-thingies?"

"Hmm, maybe ya dae need tae study more and increase yar vocabulary."

"I'm only ten! Besides, you're not much older than me."

Síofra grinned. "This body may have existed for only thirteen years, but I'm a fairy spirit who has lived through many incarna-

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tions. Ya can ken a changeling by its eyes — they always betray a wisdom far older than its apparent years. A changeling's physical lifespan may be short but our spirits are eternal."

A concerned look formed on Kaya's face. "You mean you'll die soon?"

Síofra shrugged. "I may get another four or five years from this form before it shrivels away."

Kaya pouted. "That's so unfair."

The changeling paused, turning to face the child. "Life is unfair. Tis filled with cruelty and hardship, and always ends in death."

"Aren't you frightened?" the child asked.

"I'm tae mean tae be frightened."

Kaya studied the changeling. "I don't think you're mean. I think you're scared."

"Nonsense."

The strange little girls walked along the forest path in silence. Then, Kaya piped up, "You never explained what things changelings can do."

"It depends on whom we replace. The Fae take mortal babies and leave changelings in their stead tae hide the theft. If I had been swapped for a witch's infant, then I would inherit the witch-child's powers. Had I been exchanged for a babe with the werewolf gene, I'd turn intae one myself. But I was switched with a mortal child, sae alas, I have nae unusual powers. I've had far more interesting incarnations back in my native Ireland, but the Fae magic is stronger there than in the Nevada mountains where I took this child's place."

"What happened to the girl you replaced?"

"Ya ask a lot of questions. Some are best unanswered."

Kaya's youthful exuberance was undeterred by Síofra's prevarication. "What are Fae?"

"Creatures of magic. They may be fairies, witches, elves, or trolls. All sorts of magical beings exist. The Fae are strongest in Ireland, Scotland, and England. The Irish are the best, of

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course.” Síoфра winked. “Ireland is the most beautiful place on Earth. The Sidhe, the Irish Fae, live in the grassy hills and fairy mounds, where they sing, dance, and drink their time away. Tis a land of leprechauns and pookas and magic. I miss the merri-ment of the Unseelie Court.”

“Look! Through the clearing. It must be the village. How huge it is! There are so many paths.” Kaya’s eyes scanned across the panorama. “I’ve never seen so many buildings. How many people must live within them?”

Síoфра found the callow girl’s enthusiasm amusing. Yet, she felt a twinge of caution. “Yar mother may have had a point. There are many humans here. Tis a good thing yar kimono hides all but yar hands and face, but should any look closely they would notice the patina of tiny scales coating yar skin. Let’s stick tae the less traveled side roads.”

The pair strolled down a dirt road, catching glimpses through the bushes lining the path of the villagers going about their daily routines. A bit further down the road, Kaya squatted and peered through a clump of shrubbery. “Do you see that building there? There are kids my age coming out of it. So many of them!” she gasped.

“Tis a school letting out, I’d wager. But none of them are wearing kimonos.”

“That’s odd. I’ve never seen other children, but in all the books they wear kimonos.”

“I think ya need tae ask yar mother for some modern books, or pay more attention tae yar TV.”

“I usually watch the American broadcasts. That’s how I learned to speak English. But I thought only kids in America dressed like that.”

“At least nae one will see yar scales in that outfit. If ya keep yar hands slipped inside yar sleeves, it might be safe for us tae visit the marketplace. Let’s head back.”

As they turned to leave, they saw two older girls blocking the path behind them. The changeling recognized their malicious

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grins, but her ingenuous companion, excited by the prospect of meeting her first Japanese children, stepped toward them.

"Hello," Kaya said in Nihongo. "I'm Kaya and this is my friend Síoфра. Are you from the school we passed?"

The taller girl, who appeared about 15, laughed. "The Shichi-go-san festival was last month."

Her shorter teenaged companion said, "She's too old for Shichi-go-san. What are you, nine?"

"I'm ten," Kaya replied, with a mixture of pride and indignance.

"Then, why are you wearing ceremonial robes, if not for Shichi-go-san?" she asked in a deprecatory tone.

Kaya blushed and turned diffident. "I thought... I wanted to... I didn't know..."

The taller girl stepped forward and shoved Kaya to the ground. "Aww, her pretty kimono is covered in dirt."

Síoфра helped Kaya to her feet and faced the girls. "I dinnae ken what ya said but I dinnae think I like it."

"I knew she was American," the shorter girl said, in English. "Look at her red hair."

"Ya speak English?" Síoфра asked.

"Better than you," the imperious girl replied.

"I don't think she's American," her friend said. "I never heard half her words in our English class." She approached Síoфра and tripped her, sending the changeling hurtling to the ground, flailing in her cumbersome kimono.

"Sae, they have bullies in Japan, as well." Síoфра stood and dusted off her kimono.

The tall girl grabbed Kaya's wrist and pulled her closer, but then released her in surprise. "Ew, what's with your face? That's some bad acne."

Embarrassed, Kaya turned away.

"Let's kick their butts and take their fancy kimonos." The short girl tugged Kaya's sleeve, revealing her scaled, scabrous arm. "Gross! What are you, some kind of lizard?"

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Síofra stepped between Kaya and the bullies. She spoke in a calm, yet firm tone. “Kaya, run down the path and wait for me. Dinnae turn around and dinnae come back. Understand?”

“But —” Kaya began.

The changeling faced her and Kaya saw her eyes blaze red. “Dae as I say,” she barked, in a peremptory tone.

Kaya acquiesced, racing down the path they had followed. The short girl attempted to chase her, but Síofra caught her wrist and flung her to the ground. Her companion advanced on the changeling, but Síofra plunged her fist into the girl’s solar plexus, sending her to the ground, writhing in pain. Síofra returned her attention to the short girl, kicking her head several times before she could rise. She scooped up a handful of sand and forced it into the girl’s mouth. As the prostrate teen tried to spit it out, the changeling brought her foot crashing down on the girl’s stomach, causing her to inhale and choke on the mouthful of dirt.

The tall girl climbed to her knees, still gasping from the blow to her solar plexus and surprised by the viciousness of the changeling’s attack. Síofra turned and dropkicked her, ripping her kimono in the process. The girl fell back and Síofra was atop her in an instant, her knees pressing into the incapacitated bully’s shoulders while she bitchslapped the girl’s cheeks — right, left, right, then left again — like an avenging human metronome. She continued until the girl was barely conscious. The changeling stood and yanked the girl up by her hair, dragging her to the other teen, who was still trying to spit out what little dirt she hadn’t swallowed. Síofra dropped her unceremoniously on her coccyx.

Síofra spotted a thick stick lying in the underbrush and retrieved it. The helpless teens stared up at the malevolent changeling with terror-stricken eyes as she fondled the wooden stick. “Dae ya ken I used tae skin cats alive back home for fun? Dae ya think it cruel tae derive pleasure from torturing defenseless animals? Nae, ya enjoy it as much as I dae, dinnae ya? We have that in common. But ya only think yar mean girls.” Síofra’s

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black eyes flared red. “Let me show ya what tis tae truly be a mean girl.”

Kaya gazed up and her heartbeat raced at Síoфра’s approach down the path. The child rushed to the older girl and embraced the fair-skinned changeling in an effusive hug. “I was so worried about you. Did they hurt you?”

Síoфра shook her head. “Nary a scratch.”

“Oh no,” Kaya said. “Your kimono is torn.”

“That’s all right. I dinnae think I’ll be wearing kimonos after today.”

“I guess it was a dumb idea. I wanted to be like everybody else. But I don’t know how. All I did was prove how different I am from normal kids. I thought I knew what the world outside my farmhouse was like, but it’s not like it is in the books, or even on television, is it?”

Síoфра motioned to the west. “We’ll find another path tae the marketplace.”

“What if those bad girls come after us?”

“They won’t.”

They trudged along the dirt road in silence. As they neared a grove of fruit trees, Síoфра paused to pick some loquats. “I’m famished.”

“You’re always hungry. You eat three times what Mother and I do. Mother says you’ll eat us out of house and home.”

“Changelings have voracious appetites. No matter how much food is placed before us, we could devour it and still nae be satisfied.”

“Where does all the food go?”

Síoфра smirked. “Dinnae be fooled by appearances. A changeling may look human, or even think he’s human, but we are Fae.”

“What do you mean, a changeling might think he’s human?”

“If an infant changeling is raised by mortals and grows up surrounded by only mortals, he might come tae believe he is

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one... for a while, at least. But we cannae change our nature. We are what we are: Dark Fae, whose souls are filled with evil and cruelty.”

“That’s not true. You protected me from those girls. You’re my best friend. I know sometimes you shout and do nasty things like rip up my lessons, but you’re not evil, Síofra.”

The changeling turned on the ingenuous child, and her soulless black orbs locked onto Kaya’s eyes, penetrating them. “Dinnae delude yarsel. I *am* nasty. I am mean and cruel and everything ya fear at night, huddled beneath yar covers. I am a wicked creature, a spirit of evil clad in stolen human flesh, thriving on others’ torment and pain. I am yar worst nightmare come tae life and ya cannae trust me and more fool ya if ya dae.”

Kaya shook her head. Starved for friendship, she was willing to endure the changeling’s cruelty and abuse. “You want people to think you’re mean. You told me you’re too mean to be frightened. But you lied. You wouldn’t be hiding if you weren’t afraid. I saw how you looked at that boy, Alaric. You were terrified. I heard you beg Asabi to take you far away from him. Why do you fear him so?”

Síofra thought back to their captivity in Lilith’s lair and grew pale. Her voice trembled. “Ya saw what he did.”

“Yes, he saved us all.”

The freckled changeling shook her head, the eidetic memory of their durance forever etched in her mind. “He saved himself. He’s too selfish tae care about others. But did ya see what he did? With one bolt from his palm, he shattered the demoness Lamia intae a thousand pieces. Lamia was a demigoddess and a demoness and that wee lad obliterated her with nary a thought nor effort. Seconds later, he destroyed Abyzou and Obizoth, the demoness sisters who had devoured children for millennia. Alaric annihilated three of Hell’s most powerful and feared demons in less than a minute. Can ya conceive of the power he wields? And then, he turned on Lilith — the oldest, perhaps

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most powerful demoness in creation; the first woman; she who spurned Adam, slept with thousands of demons and even the Angel of Death, defied God, murdered angels, and became the first succubus and mother of all the Lilim — and Alaric sucked the life out of the greatest succubus! There's nae angel nor demon nor Fae could have done that. He is power incarnate."

"We'd be dead if he weren't. Lilith would have killed us but Alaric killed her first. He may be powerful, but he used his power to save all of us. So why do you fear the boy who saved your life?"

Síofra cried, "Because he's nae a boy! That's what he wants everyone tae think, but I ken better. I ken what he really is, and I've nae doubt a creature as evil as he would kill tae keep his secrets. I realized it the moment I looked intae his eyes. It takes one tae ken one, dinnae it? Those deep, dark eyes — soulless orbs reflecting back at me. Eyes that betrayed a wisdom far older than his years. Dark Fae eyes of a changeling."

"Alaric is a changeling?"

"A creature of evil, but with unimaginable power at his fingertips. Ya saw, when his parents arrived, he feigned he was a helpless child. It was apparent they dae nae ken they are raising a changeling, as it was obvious he kept it secret... and I'm sure would kill tae dae sae."

"Those poor parents. Their baby was kidnapped and replaced with a changeling and they don't even know it. Someone should tell them."

Síofra's eyes widened and her mouth contorted into a rictus. "That would be suicidal. If Alaric thought his secret was at risk... dae nae even think about it!"

Síofra and Kaya strolled through the marketplace, attracting little attention despite their kimonos. Kaya noticed teenagers dressed in all fashions, from traditional to Western, and felt more at ease. "I think I shall ask Mother to buy me a pair of jeans like that girl over there has."

Strange Bedfellows

Síofra affected interest in the girl's babbling. The market had begun to bore her and she wondered if Asabi had returned to the farmhouse. "Tis getting late. We should head back."

Kaya glanced at the sky. "Tosogare! How did I not notice dusk had fallen?"

Síofra pointed to the artificial lighting illuminating the marketplace. "Let me guess. Ya dinnae have street lamps at yar farmhouse?"

"We must hurry. Mother will still be at work in the pottery shed, but we shall have to cross the forest in the dark."

"I told ya before, I can see in the dark."

Kaya shook her head. "The forest is filled with creatures. Snakes and foxes and... kyuketsuki."

The changeling laughed. "I'm nae afraid of snakes or foxes, and I thought ya liked the last kyuketsuki ya met."

Kaya felt a bit less frightened at the thought of the boy vampire. "I suppose, but what if the others aren't as friendly as Artemus?"

"Come, we must find our way back tae the forest. Which street leads us back?"

Kaya's eyes darted around the marketplace. It stretched for several blocks at different angles, with many side streets leading to and from it. Most of the roads and paths were dimly lit, if at all, and Kaya could not discern any familiar landmarks. "Don't you remember which one?"

"It was about a ten-minute walk from the forest. Let's pick one path and walk for ten minutes. If we dinnae see the clearing, we'll turn back and try another."

Apprehensive, Kaya nodded and clasped Síofra's hand. The changeling bristled at the girl's touch but held her hand as they walked. Through the waning light of the last street lamp they had passed, Kaya made out the clearing in the distance. She pointed down the deserted, caliginous street. "That's it. That's where we came in."

To Hell in a Handbasket

The changeling sniffed. “Ew, what’s that awful stench? Did some animal crawl out of the woods and die?”

“It does stink,” Kaya agreed. “Let’s hurry and —” She halted in mid-sentence, as her eyes focused on the blob that had stepped out into their path. Kaya hadn’t seen the creature, so she assumed it had been content to cling to the shadows until its pungent odor had given away its presence.

“T’anam an Diabhal!” Síofra exclaimed. “What is it?”

The chimerical creature shambled forth like a gelatinous blob; a massive lump of human flesh covered in a cascade of wrinkled skin, with a pair of hands and feet poking out from beneath the flabby folds of its epidermis. Síofra thought she discerned a face through the creased flaps where one might expect to find a head, although the creature had no neck.

“I’ve seen it in drawings in my books,” Kaya said. “It’s a nuppeppos. In the stories, they wander deserted streets at night, but they’re harmless.”

“Harmless? It stinks! That tub of lard smells like a cross between rotting flesh and a sewage leak.” Síofra picked up a bottle from the gutter and threw it at the animated lump of flesh. “Shoo! Gae away.”

The bottle caromed off the creature, leaving it unharmed but agitated. The blob quivered and lunged toward the changeling with a swiftness its mass belied.

“I think you made it angry,” Kaya cried.

Síofra released the girl’s hand so she could push the nuppeppos away, but the creature bowled her over, smothering her with its bulging mass.

“I cannae breathe,” Síofra cried, as folds of animated flesh weighed down on her, pinning her body and covering her face. A noxious miasma filled her lungs, asphyxiating the changeling, as the massive blob’s flabby flesh blocked her nose and mouth.

“No!” Kaya screamed in panic, as she watched her only friend crushed, disappearing beneath the living lump. Kaya’s heart raced and sweat glistened on the tiny scales covering her body.

Strange Bedfellows

She was panicked, fearful for her best friend's life as well as her own, desperate to act, yet uncertain what to do. She became flushed and her skin tingled. Her vision blurred and the pungent odor intensified. She felt her kimono slide down her body and she lunged toward the nuppeppos. Kaya opened her jaw as if to scream, and it stretched, and stretched, and stretched still further, until it had encompassed the nuppeppos. Her lower jaw dislocated from her upper jaw, enabling her to fit the creature into her mouth. She felt the blob slide down her throat, yet she didn't gag or choke, as she had expected.

As Kaya consumed the nuppeppos, Síofra felt the massive weight atop her lighten and flabs of flesh receded from her face. She gazed up to see a large serpent swallowing the gelatinous mass. The prostrate changeling gasped for breath and lay spent, watching the scene unfolding before her. Several minutes passed before the nuppeppos had traveled through the snake's gullet, pushed along by the small gripping teeth that lined the serpent's jaws. Kaya's skin took on an elastic quality, stretching to accommodate the lump passing through her. The ectothermic temperature of her body rose, as Kaya's digestive juices broke down and dissolved the creature's mass.

Síofra spit out pieces of nuppeppos flesh. She had bitten and scratched the monster as it smothered her, and had swallowed some of its flesh. She sat up and picked out the nuppeppos skin caked beneath her fingernails.

Having consumed the nuppeppos, the serpent shrank and shimmered, morphing into a nude girl curled into a fetal position.

Síofra stood and picked up Kaya's discarded kimono. She approached the shivering girl and held it out to her. "I dinnae ken ya could dae that."

Kaya accepted the offering, clutching it to her chest, as her ague subsided. "I didn't know I could do that, either," the frightened girl replied.

To Hell in a Handbasket

After an awkward silence, the changeling bestowed her approbation. “Ya saved my life.”

Kaya unfurled the kimono. “Will you help me put this on?” She pulled up her white tabi socks and handed her juban to Síofra. As she dressed, she said, “Mother has told me fables of women who turn into snakes. But those are bedtime stories. Hypnalsises are make-believe.”

“Maybe that’s why yar mother forbid ya from straying from yar farmhouse. Those scales of yars make sense, now.”

“Let’s not tell my mother about this. It would only upset her. Maybe it will never happen again.”

Síofra looked skeptical but did not reply. She tightened the obi around Kaya’s waist. “There. Good as new.”

“I’m glad I saved you, but it was still gross.”

Síofra gave a dyspeptic grimace. “I ken; I swallowed a few bites of old lumpy myself. I can imagine how gross it was tae eat all of him.”

An uneasy expression appeared on Kaya’s face. She remembered reading something about eating the flesh of a nuppeppos. The legends told of eternal youth to any who consumed it. She decided not to mention the myths to Síofra. She was just happy not to have lost her friend. She grasped the changeling’s hand and they walked along the road, through the clearing, and into the forest.

Kaya heard the branches snap beneath her feet but could not see even the trees of the forest in the darkness. “Slow down. I can’t see in the dark like you.”

The changeling pulled her along, pausing only to glance down at her with fiery red eyes. “I can see well enough for both of us.”

“We don’t need to hurry. Mother spends hours in the shed making her pottery. We’ll be back long before she notices we’re gone.”

“Tis nae yar mother I’m concerned about.” Síofra thought of Asabi and wondered if the emere had returned to the farmhouse

Strange Bedfellows

and, finding them gone, departed. "We should nae have been away sae long."

Kaya clung to the changeling and tried to keep pace with the older girl's larger strides. Before long, the clearing appeared within view. "I can see the light from our farmhouse."

Beyond the forest, with the moonlight unobstructed by trees to guide them, the girls raced to the farmhouse. Asabi was leaning against a wooden fence post, tapping on an hourglass-shaped drum.

Síofra's heart skipped when she saw the emere, but the red-head maintained a stoic expression. "I'd hoped we'd seen the last of ya," she said, with false indifference.

The slender, dark-skinned youth tapped rhythmically on the goatskin drumhead creating a melodic cadence. "I told Kaya I would be back. Someone has to protect her from you," he replied, engaging in mild persiflage.

Kaya hugged the changeling. "Síofra's my friend. We protect each other."

Asabi arched an eyebrow.

Síofra pushed her away. "I thought ya had lessons tae dae."

The younger girl grimaced.

Asabi reached behind him, pulled out a wooden cylindrical object, and offered it to Síofra. "I brought this for you. I thought it might relieve the boredom while you're staying here."

As she accepted the present, the changeling's lips betrayed a trace smile.

Kaya noted the six small holes lining the instrument. "Is that a flute?"

"Nae, tis a tin whistle. It may look like a humble stick of wood but ya'll nae hear finer music from any flute." Síofra turned to the emere. "How came ya by it?"

Asabi grinned. "I stopped off in Ireland to find one. I heard changelings have an affinity for music. At first, I considered the Irish pipes or a fiddle, but —"

To Hell in a Handbasket

“Nae, tis perfect.” Síoфра admired the instrument. She was unused to receiving gifts and found it difficult to restrain her enthusiasm. “Changelings are natural musicians. They say we play with such skill that all who hear us are entranced.”

“Prove it,” Asabi challenged.

Síoфра raised the tin whistle to her lips and her fingers skipped over the holes with graceful dexterity. The dulcet tones sparked magic in the night air and Kaya found herself carried away by the melody. The changeling hopped up and down, dancing a slip jig, as her music became high pitched and piercing. Síoфра pranced about the farmyard on her toes, her heels held high in precise and controlled movements, yet appearing graceful and carefree, as she performed her elegant step dance. She glided across the lawn, her nimble feet darting with quick, meticulous steps.

Asabi beat the drumhead of the dundun he had brought from his native Yoruba homeland with his stick. The hourglass-shaped talking drum was about a foot long and the drumhead was half that size. It produced long, sustained notes and Asabi positioned his free hand on the goatskin to dampen and change their tone to match the flow of Síoфра’s dance moves.

Kaya joined in the dancing, clapping her hands above her head in sync with the drumbeats. “I wish I could dance like you,” she shouted to Síoфра.

“I’d be lighter on my feet if I had my ghillies tae wear instead of these poor shoes,” the lissome changeling replied.

Asabi smiled. “You dance like an Irish ballerina.”

“Ya do a passable job on the drums,” she shot back, as she pirouetted.

“My tribe is known for their drumming tradition.” Asabi turned to Kaya, adding, “and our sculpting, as well, potter’s daughter.”

Kaya smiled at Asabi, as she capered about in her self-styled, desultory dance.

Strange Bedfellows

The changeling caught the emere's eye. "Show me more of yar tribal music and dance." There was a twinkle in Síofra's eye he'd never seen before.

The three danced beneath the moonlight and the stars, and the music wafted through the still night air and into the shed. Amaya wiped the clay from her hands onto her soiled apron and cracked open the creaking door of the pottery shed, curious to discover the source of the harmonious sounds. Her first thought, when she saw the strange, older ebon boy, was concern for her daughter; but, watching Kaya's ebullient capering as she danced in merriment with the others, Amaya sighed. She had never imagined her child would ever find friends or that she would see her dance with such unfettered joy and carefree abandon. Amaya closed the door, thankful for her daughter's happiness, yet heart-broken it was destined to be short-lived. With each passing day, she knew the time she dreaded was drawing nearer — the inauspicious moment her child would have to face her destiny as a dreaded hypnalis. Amaya closed her eyes and prayed for more time for her daughter to enjoy her life before being consumed by the inchoate serpent curse, unaware her prayers were too late.



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KEITH B. DARRELL is a cross-genre author of short stories, novels, epics, and nonfiction. His work is available in softcover and hardcover from Barnes & Noble and Amazon.com; in e-book format from Amazon.com and Payhip.com; in audiobook format from Audible.com, as a digital download from VitalSource, and on his blog at KeithBDarrell.com.

Darrell studied journalism at Broward Community College, during which time he was awarded First Place for Best In-depth Reporting from the 28-school Florida Community College Press Association. He wrote numerous hard news stories for the BCC newspaper *The Phoenix*, and articles for *Silver Sands*, the BCC feature news magazine. He was later selected as editor of *Silver Sands* and the BCC *Orientations* magazine which afforded him experience in magazine layout. He earned his Bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Florida with a concentration in News-Editorial (news writing, editing, and photojournalism). He had newspaper internships with the *Gainesville Sun*, *High Springs Herald*, and *Alachua Herald*. He was also a freelance writer and photographer for the *Gainesville Sun*, and a writer for the *Emory Law Times* and the Georgia State University *Signal*. He has interviewed dozens of celebrities and politicians.

By age 24, Darrell had earned his A.A. from Broward Community College, his B.S. in Journalism from the University of Florida, his M.B.A. from Emory University, and his J.D. from the Emory University School of Law. He went on to become a member of the State Bar of Georgia and the Florida Bar. Darrell has held many positions as a reporter, advertising representative, entrepreneur, retail business owner, insurance agent, stockbroker, real estate

Author Biography

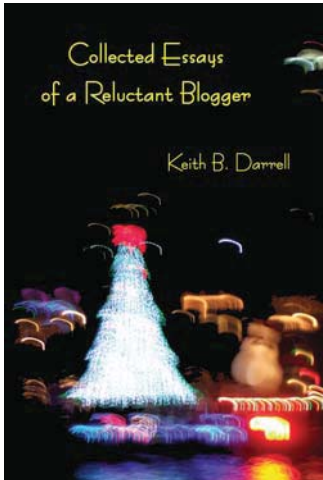
agent, Web designer, attorney, and author. In 2005, Darrell founded Amber Book Company and wrote its flagship title, *Issues in Internet Law: Society, Technology, and the Law*, which is now in its 10th edition and has been adapted as a textbook by colleges and universities worldwide. Darrell's legal articles have been published in **Securities Regulation Law Journal** and **JD/MBA Journal**.

Darrell's nonfiction books include: *Collected Essays of a Reluctant Blogger* (a collection of humorous anecdotes, philosophical musings, and insightful commentary on today's societal concerns derived from his blog at KeithBDarrell.com); *More Essays of a Reluctant Blogger*; *Putting Your Business on the Internet*; and *The Web Designer's Client Handbook*.

He has also written more than 70 short stories contained in four collections, *Randoms* (NIE Awards Finalist, 2009), *Careywood*, *Shards* (NIE Awards Finalist, 2013), and *Shards: The Omnibus Edition*; the *Halos & Horns* fantasy saga: *Paved with Good Intentions* (Book 1), *And a Child Shall Lead Them* (Book 2), *To Hell in a Handbasket* (Book 3), and *The Witches' Cauldron* (Book 4); and *The Halos & Horns Omnibus Edition* (a 904-page book consisting of the four-book series with 61 color illustrations, commentary, and the novelette, *The Pandora Chronicles*); the *Fangs & Fur* fantasy series (the spin-off series from *Halos & Horns* for vampire and werewolf fans) consisting of *Flashbacks* (Book 1), *Nightstalkers* (Book 2), and *Nosferatu, Inc.* (Book 3); *Cops and Robbers*; and the Young Adult science fiction trilogy, *The Adventures of Mackenzie Mortimer: The 25th Hour* (Book 1), *The Tomorrow Paradox* (Book 2), and *All the Time in the World* (Book 3).

Darrell's interests include his pets, photography, genealogy, art, literature, theater, old comic books, travel, and learning about different cultures and languages.

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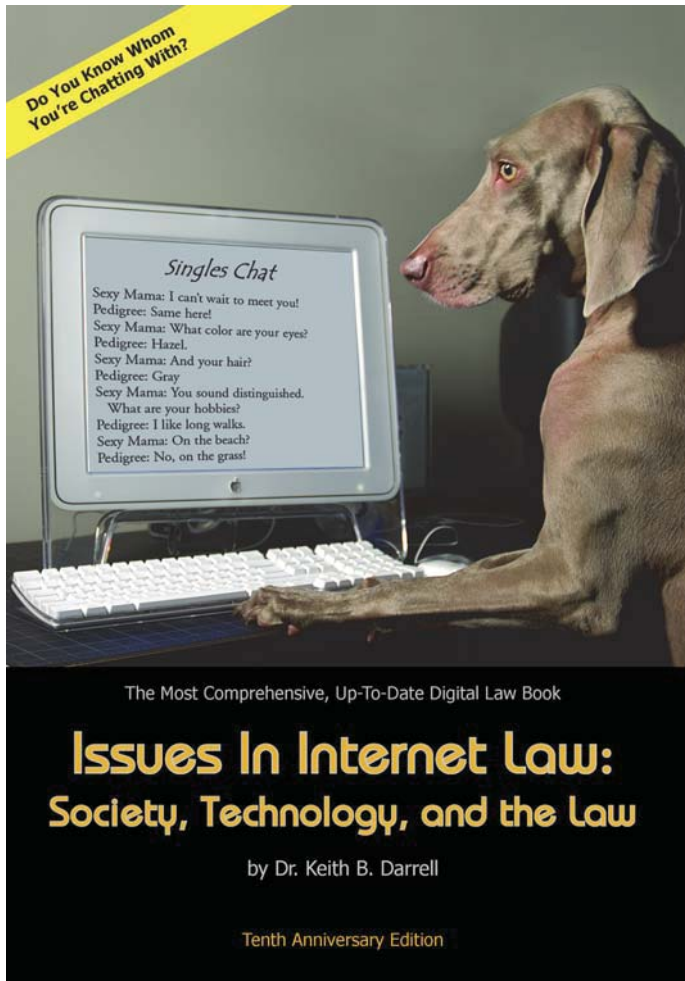
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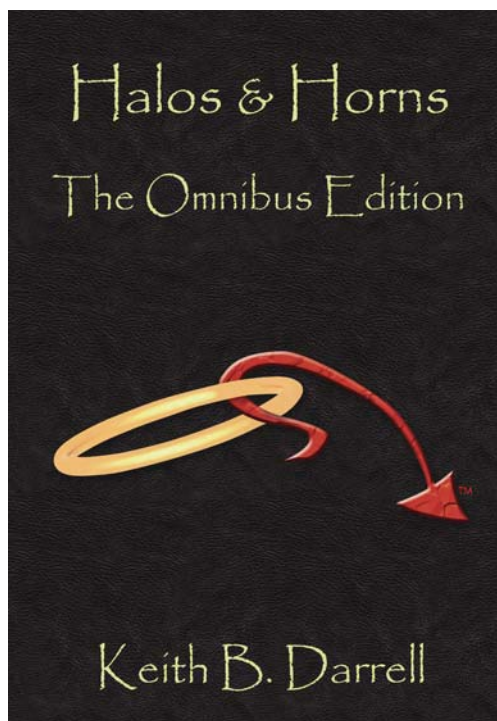
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The Halos & Horns Fantasy Saga

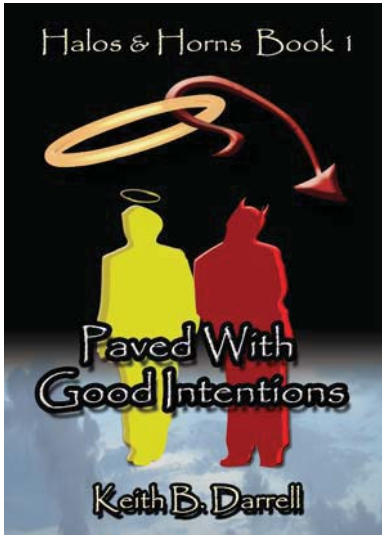
Exiled on Earth, naive angel Gabriel and amoral demon Lucifer, in the human guise of “Gabe Horn” and “Lou Cypher”, form an unlikely partnership as private investigators in Las Vegas. Their adventures take them across the seven heavenly realms, into the nine levels of Hell, through the dream realm of the Dreamscape, and even through time to Camelot. They encounter an assortment of the most imaginative characters in contemporary fantasy: dreamwalkers, golems, shapeshifters, vampires, werewolves, witches, and other supernatural creatures. Some of the vampires include Sharon — she’s Jewish, crosses don’t bother her; Pandora — trouble follows her like a shadow; Claude — he’s too claustrophobic to use a coffin; and Artemus — a 10-year-old boy who’s been a vampire for nearly 457 years; the corporate vampires of Nosferatu, Inc.; and the Skid Row “trampires”.

In Book 2, Gabe and Lou face the Dark Gods in their bid for domination of the multiverse. Ditzzy vampire Pandora is dating a werewolf, while speculation abounds over whether Lou or the warlock Mordred is the father of resident witch Samantha's baby. But now that the ancient, child-devouring succubus Lilith walks the Earth once more, how long can Samantha's infant or the other supernatural children — Emma the Cockney witchling; Siofra, the Irish changeling; Asabi, the African emere; Kaya, the Japanese hypnalis; and Artemus, the boy vampire — survive?

In Book 3, the angel Gabe Horn and demon Lou Cypher question their roles, as each embarks on a personal journey to discover his humanity, leading Gabriel to search for answers in the most unlikely of places. As Samantha ponders his proposal, Lucifer finds himself a reluctant ruler. Irish changeling Siofra adjusts to life hiding from Alaric in Japan with the ingénue Kaya, unaware of the girl's deadly secret. A familiar figure rises from obscurity to seize the reins of power at Nosferatu, Inc., while Morgana le Fay seeks vengeance for the fate of her son, Mordred.

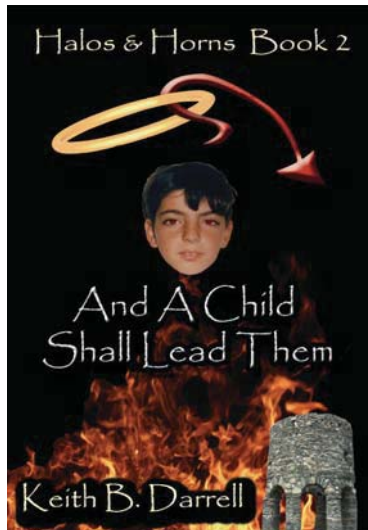
In Book 4, the angel Gabriel and the demon Asmodeus fight for their lives against usurper Baphomet and his demonic horde in his bid to take dominion of Hell; Lucifer faces judgment before the Eternals for murder; and Samantha Twitch joins forces with her sisters, witches Drusilla and Calliope, against the sorceress supreme Morgana le Fay and her Dark Fae minions. An attack on Nosferatu, Inc.'s Japanese headquarters by the Empusae, ancient vampiric demons, not only threatens Lady Chiyoko's territory, but will change the young hypnalis Kaya's life forever. Meanwhile, one character must journey back in time to 17th century Salem in search of the secret to defeating Morgana le Fay. But what other secrets does the Salem coven hold? No one is safe. As the *Halos & Horns* saga draws to its conclusion, who will survive?

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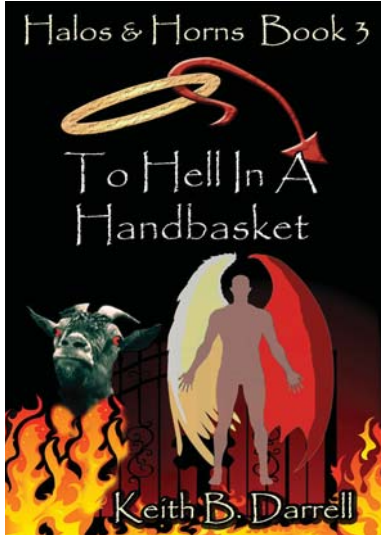
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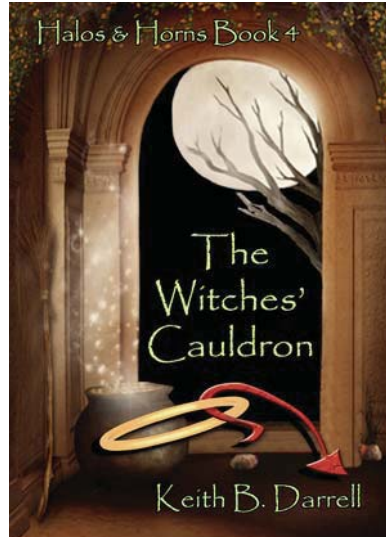
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THE FANGS & FUR FANTASY SAGA



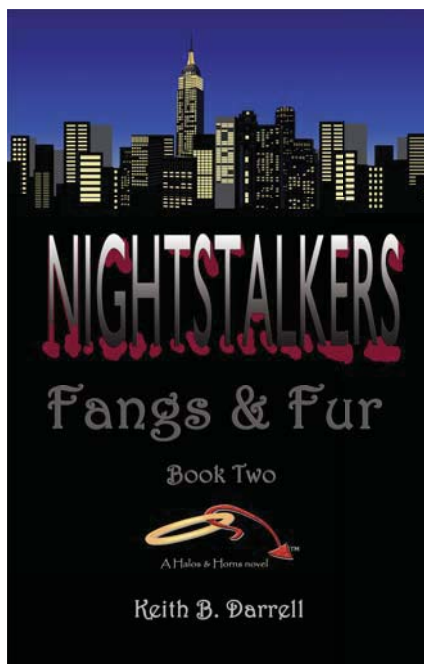
Pandora's a carefree party girl who just happens to be a vampire. With her best friend Sharon Mordecai, a hybrid vampire; her boyfriend Cody Fenris, a werewolf; and Cody's sister Lupe, who transforms into a wolf, they run Nightstalkers, Inc., a private detective agency. Pandora and Sharon also belong to Nosferatu, Inc., a worldwide corporation set up to provide relocation services for vampires, who cannot remain

in one place indefinitely, lest the "breathers" question why they never age. Other Nosferatu members include 10-year-old Artemus, the boy vampire; ex-KGB operative Valentina Petrovna; the maladroit, claustrophobic vampire Claude Gauthier; the vagrant "trampire" Seamus Callaghan; and the corporation's international board of directors: Lady Chiyoko in Japan, Callum in Australia, Isra in Dubai, Amadi in Africa, Magda in Hungary, and its CEO, the mysterious human known only as Remick.

First introduced in the *Halos & Horns* fantasy saga, these vampires and lycanthropes have their own stories to tell. These tales in *Flashbacks* shed light on their dark pasts while sowing the seeds for the next two books in the *Fangs & Fur* trilogy. They can be enjoyed as individual vampire and werewolf stories, or read by *Halos & Horns* fans to learn more about the characters populating that saga, or viewed as the prologue to the story about to unfold in the *Fangs & Fur* trilogy.

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THE FANGS & FUR FANTASY SAGA



When a Grigori unwittingly entrusts trouble-prone vampire Pandora with an ancient leather-bound box containing primordial evil, what could possibly go wrong? At least Pandora doesn't know her best friend slept with her boyfriend. Or that her werewolf beau has been targeted for revenge by one of his victims. Her BFF Sharon — the hybrid vampire infused with an angelic life force — has enough to worry

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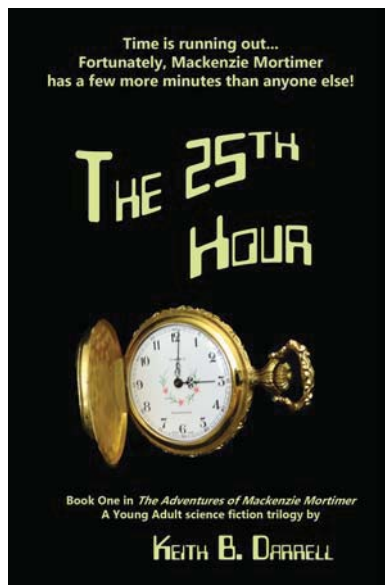
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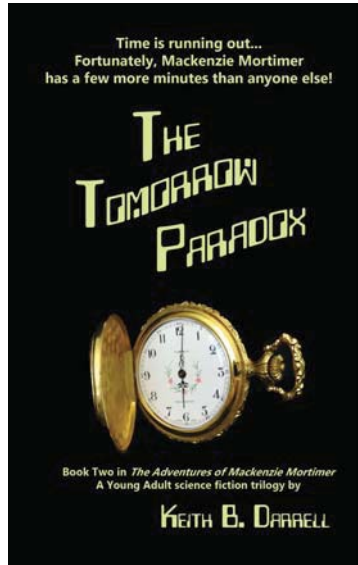


Mackenzie Mortimer is a typical junior high geek: shy, awkward, late with his homework, and always late for class. He's never got enough time to do everything he needs; after all, there are only 24 hours in a day. But when Mac finds his grandfather's pocket watch, he discovers his days have an extra hour. The eccentric inventor's journal reveals the watch can add up to 60 minutes to a single day by freezing time around whomever controls it. Marlene Prentice is Mac's best friend, but he's clueless the tomboy has a crush on him. Mac only has eyes for foxy Vanessa Carlyle, daughter of the town's richest man. When a crisis looms for Mac and his friends, time is running out... but fortunately, Mackenzie Mortimer has a few more minutes than anyone else.

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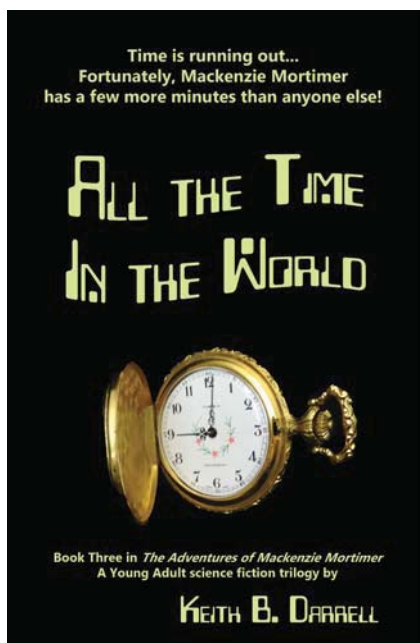
Mackenzie Mortimer's troubles are just beginning! With his pocket watch destroyed, Mackenzie finds himself a stranger in a strange land, surrounded by familiar people he doesn't really know, with only Gemma, a 15-year-old clone, to guide him through the labyrinth of the future. Will the mysterious black, iron key unlock the secrets to returning him home, or is it a harbinger of his impending doom?

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Mac has left Gramps' diary behind in the future and Victoria Carmichael's ex-husband, Jeremy Bentaine, has stolen it along with Gramps' journals. Now, Bentaine Industries seeks to be the sole possessor of time travel technology... and that means eliminating Mackenzie Mortimer before he discovers the pocket watch! But Mac has followed Gramps' trail to WWII Nazi-occupied Belgium, where he must use his future technology to stay alive, locate Gramps, and unite a pair of star-crossed lovers. The horrors of WWII that Mac encounters will change him forever, but if the Bentaine family has its way, forever will be a very short time for Mackenzie Mortimer!

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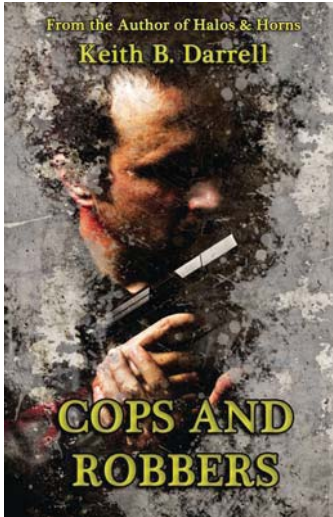
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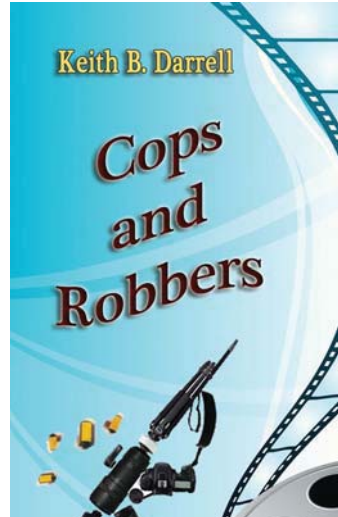
Paperback, ISBN 978-1-935971-23-8

Available from:
Amazon.com, BN.com, AmberBookCompany.com

COPS AND ROBBERS



ISBN 978-1-935971-34-4



ISBN 978-1-935971-33-7

A pair of FBI agents set up a bogus movie production as part of an unlikely sting operation to snare a mob kingpin. They buy the worst script in Hollywood and hire a failed movie producer whose career is on the skids; a third-rate aging actress whose claim to fame is having performed Shakespeare... on a cruise ship; an amphetamine-enhanced screenwriter; a hooker; a Yiddish-speaking accountant; a black, flaming gay actor; and a Native American actor who insists on dressing like an Old West dime store Indian.

However, throughout the course of the film, the mobsters and one of the FBI agents become so enamored by the glitter and glamour of Hollywood that they actually end up working together to try to make the movie a success. Our hero is a hitman in search of the redemption he doesn't believe he deserves. He realizes the fake film was never meant to be produced and develops a conscience believing it's wrong to allow the innocent actors and film crew to spend months of their lives working on a movie no one will ever see, despite the delusions of everyone else involved. Knowing their hopes and dreams will be dashed, our hero sets about trying to do the right thing.