

The Witches' Cauldron

Halos & Horns Book 4: The Witches' Cauldron

By Keith B. Darrell

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The Witches' Cauldron / Keith B. Darrell

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Interlude:

The Dollhouse

*I*t was a modest house, Kennedy thought. The kind of house that was not large, but large enough. The yard was big enough to fill with autumn leaves, but not so big they could not be raked away with an hour's effort. She could tell from the structure's wear and tear the house was not old, yet was old enough to have seen its mortgage paid off. It was a family home, the type of house a young couple with a child might purchase and work decades to pay off, where notches on a doorway marked an adolescent's growth spurts over the years; the kind of home that bespoke of memories and happier times. It exuded warmth, and the scent of freshly baked apple pie wafted through its halls. It was the kind of home Kennedy had never known, outside of a few pleasant childhood dreams that lasted only until the morning's harsh reality intruded on her austere surroundings, crushing her fantasies like ants beneath a shoe heel.

That it had been her father's home intrigued her, for her sire had, until a few days ago, always been an enigma. Her mother had never discussed him and Kennedy had grown up believing her mother truly did not know which of her johns had been

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responsible for her conception. Kennedy stared at the photos on the mantel. *Mom knew. All along, she had known.*

She picked up one of the framed photos. He looked so young in his patrolman's uniform. He had seemed so much older, so mature, to her teenaged eyes at the time. He didn't resemble the grownup "Uncle" Mordecai of her memories. This young officer was rather handsome, almost dashing in his police attire.

"I saw you at the funeral, today." The words snapped Kennedy from her reverie with the force of a bucket of ice water unexpectedly splashed onto her face. She turned to see the black-clad grieving widow behind her. The real world rematerialized around her, and she saw and heard the other mourners sitting shiva in the living room.

A childhood spent on the wrong side of town followed by years as a prostitute had left Kennedy with an unerring ability to adapt quickly to almost any situation. She nodded. "I'm a friend of Sharon's. You have a lovely house, Mrs. Mordecai." The widow was a large-framed woman who resembled the type of wife whom she had pictured married to the gruff, hardboiled detective. She tried to discern the visage of the young bride who had captured the heart of the dashing patrolman in the faded photo.

"Did you know my husband?"

Kennedy blinked. "Not very well." She had known him her whole life, yet it was an honest answer, tinged with regret.

Mrs. Mordecai grasped her hand and led her from the room. "Come. Those yentas will jabber for hours, or at least until the food runs out." She guided Kennedy down the hallway, into a musty garage. "I've been after him for years to clear this out." The widow gestured to the cartons, trunks, and old furniture that filled the enclosed garage. "Guess I'll have to be the one to finally do it."

Mrs. Mordecai noticed a vintage shoeshine box had caught Kennedy's eye. Made of oak, it looked well crafted and sturdy, despite the nicks and scratches on its wooden surface. The cast

The Dollhouse

iron footrest atop the box doubled as its handle. “That was his father’s. It was the only possession he brought with him from the old country. He stepped off the boat, fifteen years old and alone in a foreign country, with nothing but a wood box. It took him years to learn to speak English, but he didn’t need to say much to shine shoes. Turned out to be a good business; in Brooklyn, shoes always get scuffed.” The older woman grinned. “By the time my husband was a little boy, his father had gone into the garment trade and had no use for it. He gave it to him to play with. My husband told me how he would take it around the neighborhood, offering to shine shoes wherever he went, despite the laughter and derision of the local kids. He said if it had been good enough for his old man, it was good enough for him. He understood, you do what you have to, to survive, you know?”

Kennedy nodded. That had been one of her early life lessons, as well.

“He was proud of his father and what he had accomplished, coming from such humble origins. But the son didn’t fare as well as his old man. He barely earned enough to keep himself supplied in shoeshine and brushes — bullies would steal his earnings, forcing him to learn to fight back as a street brawler.” She shrugged. “Maybe that’s why he grew up to be a cop. He knew what it was like to be a victim, with no one to turn to.”

Kennedy smiled fondly. “He always wanted to save the world.”

“No, not save the world. Just to make it a safer place for those of us that have to live in it.” She walked to an old walnut dresser, pulled open the top drawer, and peered inside. “Still here.” She lifted a tiny box from the drawer and flipped it open. “I discovered it one day when I was putting away his socks.”

Kennedy gaped at the medal pressed against the light-blue silk ribbon dotted by 13 white stars. “I didn’t even know he had been in the war.”

“Neither had I. That was long before we met. He was drafted the year the Vietnam War ended. All he had to do was keep his head down for a few months and come home; but you know, that

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wasn't his style. They were on patrol in the jungle, when they were ambushed by the North Vietnamese. He stayed behind, lobbing grenades at the Viet Cong snipers, so the rest of the troops could escape. He was wounded by shrapnel but eventually caught up with the others. In all the years we were married, that was the only time he ever talked about the war. I think he wanted to lock away all the horrible memories of everything he saw and experienced in those jungles and rice paddies into this tiny box."

"I knew he was heroic... but I never imagined him as a war hero." Kennedy smiled. "I guess he was a lot more modest than he let on."

"I suppose that's the point of modesty, dear." She placed the medal box back in the drawer and pulled out a cardboard cigar box. The cardboard had been painted over and glitter glued in various design patterns on the lid and sides. "DAD" was spelled out by three pink pipe cleaners, also glued to the lid. "Sharon made this for him when she was nine. She probably thought he had thrown it away, but he saved it. When Sharon ran away from home, he changed. He was constantly distraught and his frustration often came across as anger. A lot of his friends and coworkers couldn't fully appreciate the enormity of what we were living through each day, as parents of a missing teenager. We didn't know if Sharon was alive or dead. We'd jump each time the phone rang, hoping for news, yet fearing the worst had occurred. Sharon ran away when she learned she had been adopted. You see, I couldn't have my own children. I think what hurt him most was, she ran away before he could tell her he couldn't have loved her more if she had been his own flesh and blood. He didn't want her to die alone out there not realizing that. There were so many nights I'd wake and find myself alone in bed. I'd find him in here, standing by the dresser, cradling the cigar box like a precious newborn. I'd slip off back to bed and pretend to be asleep when he tried to climb into bed without waking me."

"You never let him know you knew where he was?"

The Dollhouse

“The secret of a successful marriage is knowing when to be supportive and when to give your partner the space they need. Those late night sojourns were moments he needed to be alone... with his thoughts, his feelings, and his memories of Sharon.”

“He doted on Sharon.” Kennedy sighed, in envy.

“From the time she was a little girl. One year, he spent his Christmas bonus on a lavish dollhouse for her. His entire bonus! Spoiled her rotten, he did. He worked overtime for the next three months and then he bought this.” She pulled a drop cloth off an object on a table, revealing an extravagant dollhouse. “This one was even fancier than the first. He hid it here in the garage. I thought he was hiding it from Sharon, intending it as a surprise birthday present. I didn’t let on I’d seen it because I didn’t want to get into a fight over it. Money was tight enough, and as much as I love my daughter, she didn’t need two expensive dollhouses. But how can you get upset with a man for loving his daughter too much? So, I ignored it. But Sharon’s birthday passed and it remained stored in the garage under the drop cloth.”

“It’s beautiful. It even has intricate furniture inside. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Deep down, I believe he wanted one even more detailed than the dollhouse he had gotten Sharon. It’s sat here all these years, waiting. At first, I’d thought it was a gift for Sharon, but as the years passed, I realized it wasn’t meant for her, after all. Especially when I noticed the name engraved in pink script above the door — “Monica”. I always wondered who Monica was... and why he never gave her the dollhouse.”

Kennedy gulped.

“Eventually, I realized it was guilt that made him buy the lavish gift; and guilt, and perhaps fear, that kept him from bestowing it.”

Kennedy looked up from the dollhouse with tears trickling down her cheeks. “You knew? All these years?”

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"I suspected. You don't live with a police detective for twenty years without some deductive reasoning skills rubbing off on you. At first, I thought it might be evidence in one of his cases, but there were other strange things over the years. The savings passbook I found in a drawer, with "Monica" scrawled on the first page in his handwriting, that showed small deposits each month; the envelope tucked behind his desk drawer with tiny school photos of a little girl; and the faraway look he'd get in his eye sometimes when I caught him staring at Sharon as she was growing up."

"You never confronted him?"

Mrs. Mordecai shook her head. "I couldn't be sure. Besides, it was up to him to tell me." She paused. "You're older than our daughter. I could tell from the photos. He wasn't the type of man to cheat on his wife. I figured whatever took place between him and your mother happened long before we met."

"I just found out. I always thought he was an old friend of my mother's. I used to call him Uncle Mordecai. He never told me the truth, either."

"You, me, Sharon... we all have our secrets. He was entitled to his, as well." She handed Kennedy a family photo album. "You should have this. A girl should know her father. I'll have Sharon bring you the dollhouse, if you'd like it."

Kennedy studied the ornate dollhouse. "I never had one, growing up. Mom got me a doll once. When I asked for a dollhouse, she said dolls don't need houses; that I should be thankful I had a house and I was lucky not to be sleeping out on the street. She had more important things to spend her money on... booze and dope."

Mrs. Mordecai grimaced.

"Did... did Sharon have a lot of dolls when she was growing up? And toys?"

Mrs. Mordecai nodded.

Kennedy ran her hand along the dollhouse's trim. "I bet she had birthday parties, too, didn't she?" She thought of the lovely

The Dollhouse

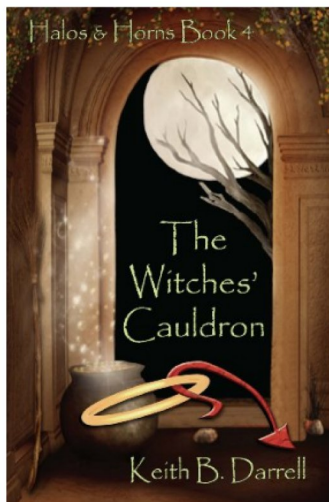
home she was in, and of her own austere childhood home. "Sharon probably had lots of friends, too. I doubt she'd have been ashamed to have her friends see where she lived."

"I can see a lot of him in you. You've got his eyes. In a way, you're all that's left of him. I hope you'll visit again, Monica."

"You don't hate me?"

"How could I hate an innocent child? You haven't done anything wrong. Come, the others must be wondering where we've disappeared to." She smiled fondly at the younger woman. "We can't let them eat all the food."

The two women walked back to the garage entrance. Mrs. Mordecai flipped the light switch off, but before she did, Kennedy gazed back into the garage for another look at the dollhouse with her name inscribed above its door.



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by [Keith B. Darrell](#)

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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

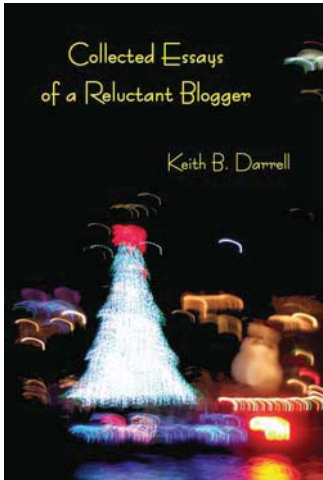
agent, Web designer, attorney, and author. In 2005, Darrell founded Amber Book Company and wrote its flagship title, *Issues in Internet Law: Society, Technology, and the Law*, which is now in its 10th edition and has been adapted as a textbook by colleges and universities worldwide. Darrell's legal 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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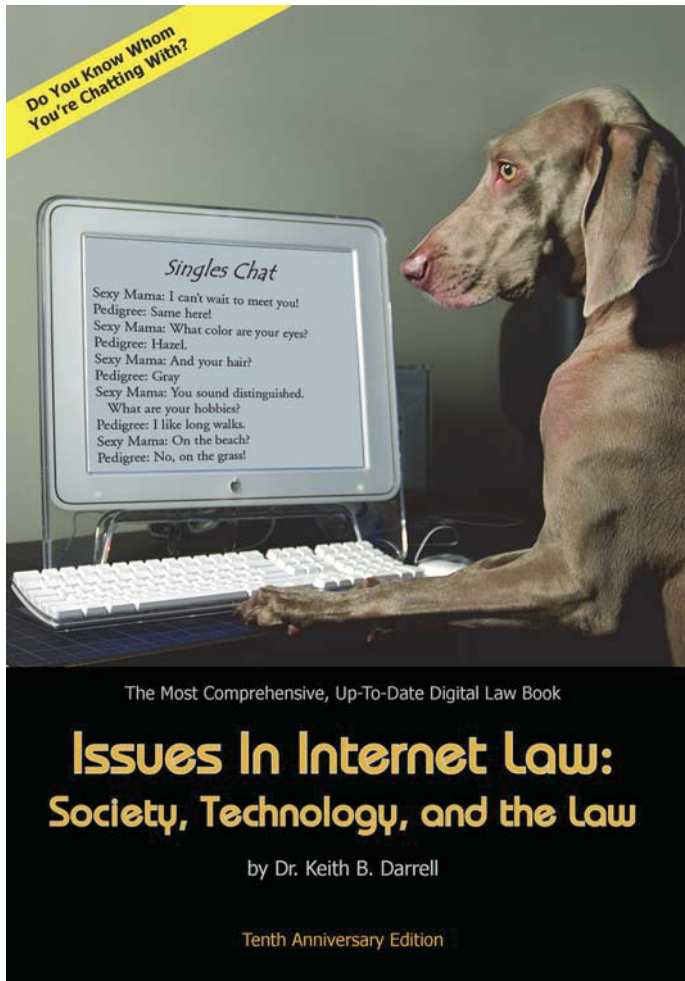
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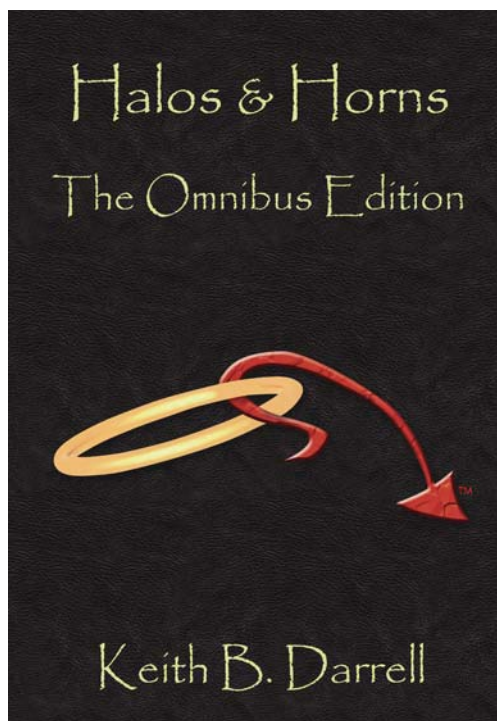
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THE HALOS & HORNS FANTASY SAGA



The Halos & Horns Omnibus Edition, a deluxe coffee table book replete with 61 new color illustrations, contains all four volumes in the *Halos & Horns* fantasy saga; the author's previously unpublished essays on the mythos; the comprehensive *Guide to the Halos & Horns Multiverse*; and the novelette, *The Pandora Chronicles* — a preview of the forthcoming *Fangs & Fur* series, the spin-off from *Halos & Horns* for vampire and werewolf fans.

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The Halos & Horns Fantasy Saga

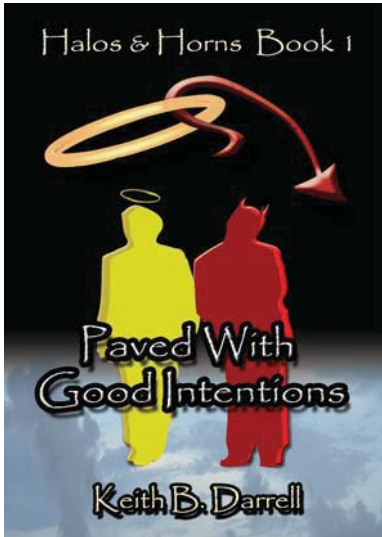
Exiled on Earth, naive angel Gabriel and amoral demon Lucifer, in the human guise of “Gabe Horn” and “Lou Cypher”, form an unlikely partnership as private investigators in Las Vegas. Their adventures take them across the seven heavenly realms, into the nine levels of Hell, through the dream realm of 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.

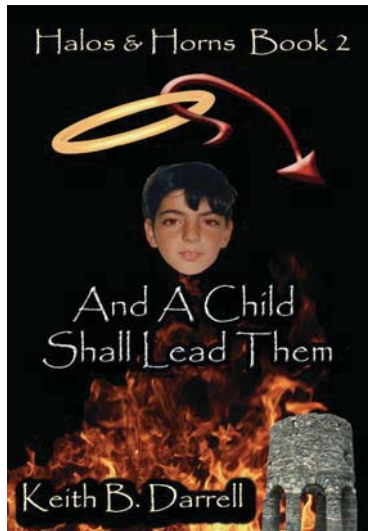
In Book 4, the angel Gabriel and the demon Asmodeus fight for their lives against usurper Baphomet and his demonic horde in his bid to take dominion of Hell; Lucifer faces judgment before the Eternals for murder; and Samantha Twitch joins forces with her sisters, witches Drusilla and Calliope, against 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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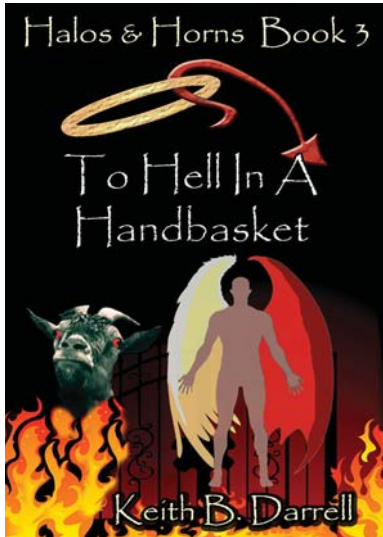
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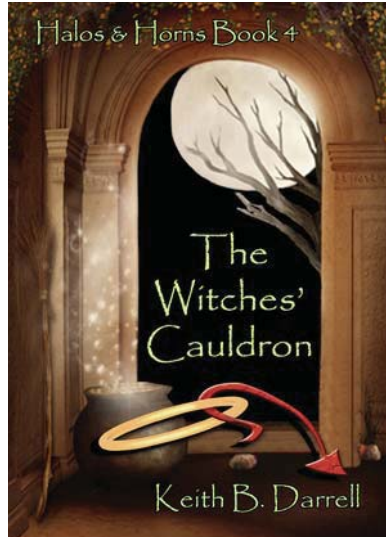
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THE FANGS & FUR FANTASY SAGA



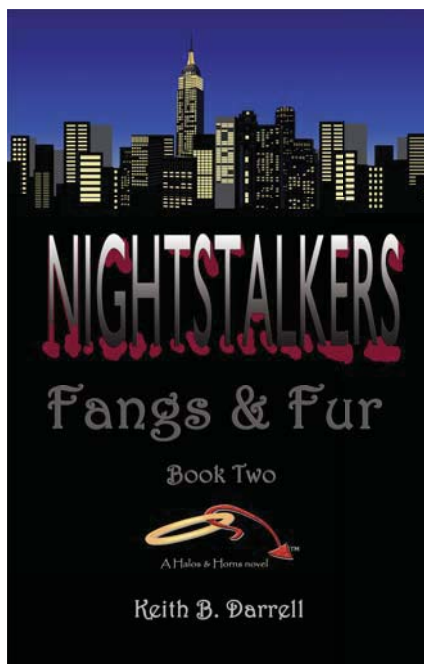
Pandora's a carefree party girl who just happens to be a vampire. With her best friend Sharon Mordecai, a hybrid vampire; her boyfriend Cody Fenris, a werewolf; and Cody's sister Lupe, who transforms into a wolf, they run Nightstalkers, Inc., a private detective agency. Pandora and Sharon also belong 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

about now that a deranged scientist/occultist is creating his own Frankenstein monster and requires an angelic life force to animate it. He's resurrected the spirit of Jack the Ripper to supply the body parts he needs from Las Vegas prostitutes. Should Kennedy be worried to walk the city streets?

After a Valkyrie whisks the Nightstalkers, Inc. team of private eyes — vampires Sharon and Pandora, and lycanthrope siblings Cody and Lupe Fenris — off to the Otherworld dimension of the Fae to recover Thor's golden gauntlets from the Dark Fae's leader, the Morrigan, the team will be forever changed. And how does that tie in with their new landlord Kitty Bast, an Egyptian cat goddess?

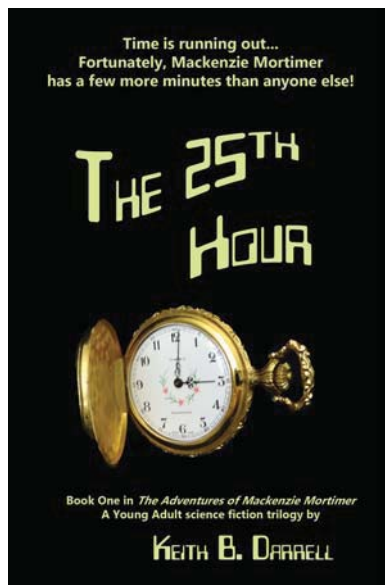
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BOOK ONE

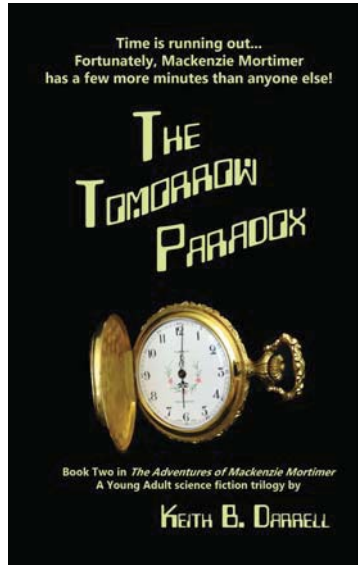


Mackenzie Mortimer is a typical junior high geek: shy, awkward, late with his homework, and always late for class. He's never got enough time to do everything he needs; after all, there are only 24 hours in a day. But when Mac finds his grandfather's pocket watch, he discovers his days have an extra 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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THE ADVENTURES OF MACKENZIE MORTIMER
Book Two



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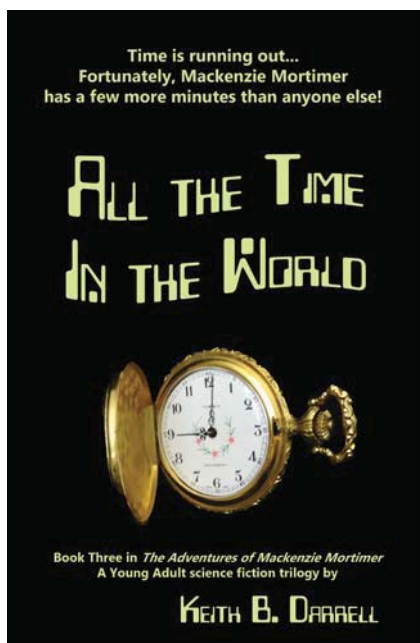
Mackenzie Mortimer's troubles are just beginning! With his pocket watch destroyed, Mackenzie finds himself a stranger in a strange land, surrounded by familiar people he doesn't really know, with only Gemma, a 15-year-old clone, to guide him through the labyrinth of the future. Will the mysterious black,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

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THE ADVENTURES OF MACKENZIE MORTIMER

BOOK THREE



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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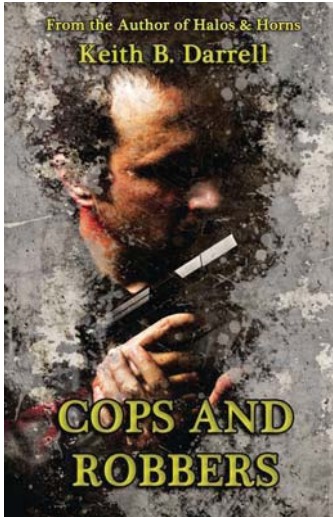
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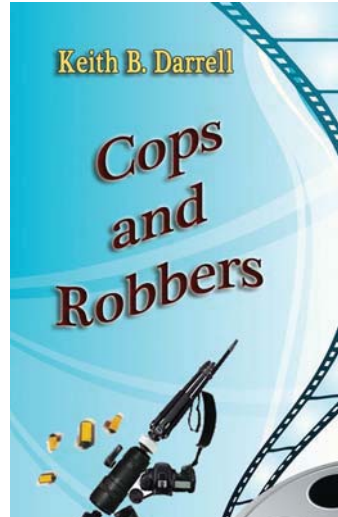
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COPS AND ROBBERS



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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.