

Fangs & Fur: Flashbacks

Fangs & Fur Book 1: Flashbacks

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Valentina: Days of the Czar

Stalingrad, 1956:

VALENTINA GAZED AROUND THE SEEDY neighborhood bar. Now that it was dark, the evening shift workers from the local plant would soon stumble in, seeking liquid relief from the bottles of vodka that lined the wall. They knew when they eventually arrived home, their wives would berate them for having spent their precious wages on alcohol when the necessities of everyday life — bread, meat, gasoline, and clothing — were rationed and only found in abundant supply on the expensive black market. Yet another reason the weary husbands chose to linger at their watering hole. Despite the propaganda circulated to the outside world, life in the Soviet Union was a bleak and dreary existence, made bearable only by vodka, the lifeblood of the working man. But Valentina's lifeblood was not that clear, tasteless liquid but rather the sapid, crimson fluid that flowed through their veins. She frequented the squalid establishments for the same reason they did: it was the best place in town to get a drink.

An attractive woman like Valentina had no difficulty attracting the wandering eye of a drunken Russian factory

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worker. He would follow her outside to the alley behind the bar, where they would have a brief encounter unlike any he had imagined moments earlier. The men seldom had time to notice her fangs pop out past her lips, or feel the pain as her extended canine teeth sunk into their necks and tore open their jugular veins. Usually, Valentina drank only enough to quench her thirst and restore her vitality, hypnotizing the men into forgetting what had occurred. But sometimes, her hunger was insatiable and she was unable to stop herself. Days later, a nearly bloodless body would turn up in a trashcan in the alley. It never occurred to Valentina she might be leaving a trail or that there might be anyone capable of detecting such a trail.

A man sat beside her. Valentina could tell immediately he was not a factory worker. His shoes were unscuffed and cost more than a worker could afford. His hands were soft and uncalloused, and he had a sobriety about him that marked him as an apparatchik — one of the Communist Party's functionaries or government bureaucrats. Uncomfortable in his presence, she rose from her seat, but he gestured for her to remain.

"The night is young; we have many hours before dawn," the man said.

Hearing him utter the word 'dawn' made Valentina even more uncomfortable. "Excuse me. I must be going."

"That would be most unwise, Comrade. The streets are not safe at night. Scores of men have been found murdered in alleys behind bars such as this one. But you need not worry. My men will guard you when you are ready to leave."

"I appreciate your concern, Comrade, but it is unwarranted. I assure you, I'm quite capable of taking care of myself."

The man arched an eyebrow. "I don't doubt that, but these murders all have telltale marks that indicate one individual was responsible for all of them. Not just any marks, but bite marks. We believe the killer to be a vampire."

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Valentina forced a laugh. “A creature of children’s tales and peasant legends? If you and your companions truly believe such nonsense, then you have superstitious fools for companions.”

He reached into his overcoat, pulled out a sharpened wooden stake, and placed it in front of her. “If we are fools, then we are well-armed fools. My men have stakes, crosses, and even holy water. The vampire will not be able to leave this building. All of the exits are covered and the bar is surrounded.”

“You said ‘*your men*’?” Valentina replied with aplomb. “You’re with the government?”

“It is a recently formed agency—the Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti — the Committee for State Security. KGB, for short. We specialize in gathering information — and people — that might be of use to the state. You’ve been under surveillance for several months, Comrade Petrovna... Or should I say, Countess Petrovna?”

Valentina tensed and her eyes darted about the room in saccadic movements. She noted the inimical trench-coated men stationed at the door and by the windows. Realizing she was trapped, Valentina asked, in a tremulous voice, “Do you propose to slay me here or to take me to a more private place of execution?”

“Citizens either work for the state or they are enemies of the state. My job is to collect information to determine which are our friends and which are our enemies. Your existence need not necessarily be terminated. The KGB might find someone with your unique powers and abilities invaluable in its espionage endeavors. But there are gaps in your file. Rather large gaps and it is my duty to fill these lacunas. You will tell me what I need to know. I shall evaluate what you say and decide whether you are a mad dog that needs to be put down or a potentially valuable weapon we may employ against the Americans.”

“You realize vampires can turn to mist?”

The KGB agent almost smiled. “Of course. As you say, we all grew up with the legends. That is why I’ve had the door and windows hermetically sealed while we’ve been speaking. I

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should also advise you, my men are scattered throughout the lounge armed with revolvers loaded with silver bullets. The bar is a dark and dingy place tonight, but when the sun rises and shines through the windows filling the room with bright sunlight, I assure you it will look completely different. If you wish to deny you're a vampire, then we can wait until morning to begin our interview. Otherwise, there is still plenty of time for you to be escorted to safety from the sun's rays."

Valentina spotted several more men in suits and trench coats positioned throughout the room. She gazed up at the wall clock above the bar and then at the guarded entrance. Faced with an ineluctable situation, the pragmatic vampire acquiesced. "What do you want to know?"

The KGB agent lit a cigarette. He offered Valentina one, but she declined. "According to our records, you were last sighted in Moscow in 1916. There are reports that place you in the company of the Romanovs in broad daylight, so presumably you were human at the time." He pulled a notepad from his trench coat pocket and flipped it open. "There were rumors linking you to several jewel thefts, although I could find no record of any formal charges. Then, one day you mysteriously vanished. History assumed you had been slain along with all the other nobility. A reasonable assumption, given the October Revolution meant certain death for any carrying noble blood within their veins. Then again, whose blood was flowing through your veins at that point? When and how did you become a vampire? And where have you been for the past forty years?"

Valentina sighed. "I believe I'll have that cigarette, now."

He handed her a cigarette from the pack and lit it for her.

Valentina took a puff. "It's a complicated story of two evil men motivated solely by self-interest; of a woman ostracized by all around her; and of a desperate mother's love for her child. It is a tragic tale of a doomed family, guided by a madman, and threatened by a ruthless beast. I was merely a casualty, collateral damage, yet I am still here and my friends are long dead."

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“You admit your friendship with the Romanovs?”

“As a patrician, I traveled in their circles and came to know them quite well. Particularly Alexandra. She was about ten years older than me, but when she left her native Germany to come to Russia to marry Nicholas, she was only twenty-two. The people never truly accepted her and that lack of acceptance turned into bitter resentment during the first world war, when Russian boys died at the hands of the Germans. Of course, they blamed Nicholas, as well, for his conduct of the war after he left the palace to take charge on the front lines. The people also transferred their distrust of Rasputin to Alexandra, believing he held sway over the decisions she made during Nicholas’s absence.”

“The mad monk? You actually met him?”

Valentina laughed. “I did more than meet Rasputin: I led him to his death.” She took a drag on her cigarette. “He may have been mad, but he was never a monk. He spent only three months at a monastery before marrying, yet claimed he’d found religion. Rasputin made a lot of claims, many of dubious veracity. But poor Alexandra believed them all.”

Alexander Palace in Tsarskoe Selo, Russia, December 1916:

Valentina admired the enormous portraits lining the walls of the hall as she passed them. She glanced up at the intricate scene painted on the ceiling within one of the caissons before returning her eyes to the wonders surrounding her. Her hostess led her past the Grand Staircase, the magnificent marble stairs in the center of the palace, down the Arabesque Hall with its Renaissance paintings and dual rows of gilt bronze sconces overlooking an array of oval mirrors. They continued until they reached the Silver Study, a more intimate room with only one window, which overlooked the Private Garden.

“I find this room to be so peaceful and tranquil,” Czarina Alexandra said. “I gaze out at the beautiful garden and for a

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brief time I forget that there are also people outside these walls, people whose hearts are filled with hatred and animosity toward me.”

“Alexandra, surely you exaggerate,” Valentina replied. “Peasants are always envious of royalty. It’s natural for there to be a certain degree of resentment and rancor among those who gaze at you in the street as your carriage passes them by, questioning by what vicissitude of fate you were born into nobility and not they.”

“No, it’s more than plebeian envy. They hate me because I am German, and more so since Russia is now at war with Germany. I’ve adopted their language and their religion, yet they still view me as an outsider. Nicholas and I were married a week after Alexander died and he became emperor; the peasants whispered it was an inauspicious omen that my arrival to marry Nicholas was in the shadow of his predecessor’s casket. No, Valentina, I do not exaggerate. Besides Anna Vyrubova, you are the only Russian woman I can call my friend and confidante.”

“Mme. Vyrubova did you no favor by introducing you to that mountebank, the Siberian peasant.”

“Please, Valentina. I must insist you not speak that way of Rasputin. You should not vilify him; he has saved my son’s life on several occasions.”

Valentina gazed up at the mention of the ailing czarevich. “Where is Alexei?”

“Upstairs with Anastasia, in the playroom. The boy loves all his sisters, but Olga, Tatiana, and Maria are so much older. With only three years difference between them, Anastasia and Alexei are especially close.”

“I know how difficult it is for you, caring for a convalescent child, but beware your concern for the boy does not leave you vulnerable to charlatans who seek only to beguile you so as to improve their own social standing by their association with you.”

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“Rasputin is not a charlatan. He is a holy man with powers he has used to heal Alexei’s internal bleeding, when the best doctors in Russia had been unable to do so. He is Alexei’s only hope... and that is why I have sent for you, dear friend.”

“For me?” Valentina’s face expressed her puzzlement. “I have no experience with blood diseases such as hemophilia.”

“I do not need another useless doctor. What I need is my own Mata Hari.”

Valentina frowned. “The exotic dancer?”

“Like you, she has relationships and liaisons with many powerful men from other countries. According to the reports I’ve read, the French believe Mata Hari to be a spy, using her contacts to travel across international borders to aid the enemy. I need a beautiful woman, who is comfortable traveling in our social milieu among the nobility, who can seduce a man while robbing him blind.”

“Alexandra, what are you accusing me of?”

“I make no accusations, Valentina. You know I adore you and treasure your friendship. It is because of that friendship that I feel I may speak as frankly with you as you have with me. We both know you are a countess in name only, living on purloined wealth. Do not seek to deny it; it matters not to me. I find it amusing you are continually invited to so many soirées where the hostess and guests find themselves bereft of their jewels. I admire your initiative. Those pompous fools have more jewels than they know what to do with, and I would rather see you, my friend, benefit from them. Fortunately for you, they do not know you as well as I do.”

Valentina smiled uncomfortably. “What is it you would have me do?”

Alexandra picked up a photograph of Alexei from the mantelpiece and gazed at her son’s likeness. “We have been most fortunate that Rasputin has been able to save Alexei each time the bleeding has threatened his life. But Rasputin may not

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always be here, and the incidents can occur any time without notice. I want my son cured of this damned disease and the suffering it brings.”

“I wish the boy cured as well, but there is no known cure for his condition.”

“But there is, Valentina. Rasputin knows of a permanent cure but I need your help to obtain it. Will you do this for me, my friend? Can I rely on your aid and discretion?”

“Of course. I know how much Alexei means to you.”

“He is my world.”

“Tell me of this cure.”

Alexandra set the photograph back on the mantel. “Rasputin has used his powers of hypnosis to stem Alexei’s internal bleeding. He has learned of the existence of a supernatural ring, known as the Blood Ring, which enhances the wearer’s hypnotic abilities and can control the blood flowing through another’s veins. If he possessed the Blood Ring, Rasputin would be able to effect a permanent cure for Alexei.”

“Where is the Blood Ring?”

“On the finger of an obscure Romanian count from Transylvania. I have invited him to the palace to discuss his nation’s political alignment. The Austrian-Hungarian Empire is splintering into a cluster of disparate nationalities. The Romanians will likely ally themselves with us, against Austria-Hungary and Germany. The count believes I have invited him here to be wined and dined. In reality, I have brought him here to be separated from the Blood Ring.”

“I assume he will be your guest at the palace for the duration of his visit. Show me his room and I will sneak inside during the night, as he sleeps, and slip the ring from his finger without waking him.”

“It shall not be that easy. Although I have invited the count to stay at the palace, he has insisted on residing at a small inn in the village.”

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“How odd! Imagine turning down the opportunity to spend the night in one of the royal palaces and opting instead for the village inn. He sounds a very strange man.”

“Indeed, that is how he struck me upon our first meeting. Count Dracula insists he is a private man who would feel more comfortable in closer quarters. He won’t return to the palace before tonight. I shall introduce you to him at the state dinner.”

Valentina grimaced. “It’s one thing to unclasp a bejeweled brooch or necklace from a distracted duchess in a crowded room, but rings tend to hug the finger tightly and do not remove without noticeable effort. It would be easier if he were asleep, with his fingers relaxed.”

Alexandra grinned. “No matter how private a man the count claims to be, he is nonetheless a man. And men have concupiscent needs. He’s in a strange town and will likely seek companionship for the evening. I know I’m asking the unthinkable of you, dear Valentina, but I ask not for myself but for Alexei. If I could do it myself, I would, but as empress I cannot risk it. Besides, you are younger and far more attractive, and thus more likely to win the count’s favor. You need not engage in carnal relations with him; I shall have Rasputin supply you with a potion to make the count fall into a deep sleep. Then, you can steal his ring and bring it here.”

“If his slumber is not deep enough and he awakens to find me prying his ring from his finger... is the count known to be a violent man?”

Alexandra gulped. “What I ask of you is not without significant risk. I am aware of the danger, as are you. But this is for Alexei. Russia needs its future czar and I need my son.” The czarina dropped to her knees. “I am Alexandra Feodorovna, czarina of the Russian Empire, the most powerful woman in Russia, and I am begging you to help me. Return with the Blood Ring and I shall be eternally in your debt. You may have anything you wish — jewels, land, or anything I possess — no price is too high for my son.”

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Valentina bent and helped Alexandra to her feet. "I am a loyal Russian, and if Russia's sons and brothers are willing to risk their lives for the motherland, how can I do any less?" She gazed into the czarina's eyes, and whispered, "I am also a loyal friend. I shall return with the Blood Ring... or not at all."

During their stay at Alexander Palace, the Imperial family dined in the Reception Room of Emperor Nicholas II. This night was no different, although on this occasion, the air was filled with pomp and ceremony. The patter of the guests' footsteps as they crossed the inlaid wood floor echoed throughout the enormous room. The flames from the fireplace cast dancing shadows on the oak panels that lined the walls. Valentina studied the foreign count seated across from her at the dinner table. She found his mere presence intimidating. His features, Valentina observed, had a harshness about them, an ineffable quality that nonetheless inspired a deep primal fear to surface in those who viewed him. His aquiline nose made him appear more like a beast of prey, and his sonorous voice exemplified his aristocratic mien, marking him as an imperious ruler confident of his empery. Whenever he turned to address her, Valentina felt Dracula's eyes piercing her soul. She steeled her nerves and forced a pleasant smile to her lips. "Count Dracula, you've hardly touched your beef stroganoff."

"The meal was delicious, however I am a man of simple tastes. I spent much of my youth in battle, and consequently never developed the gourmand's palette that typifies so much of Western royalty."

"How unfortunate that an urbane man such as yourself is unable to appreciate the pleasure of fine dining."

"I prefer good drink to good food. Later this evening, I shall enjoy a pleasant stroll through your village and drink deeply of all it has to offer."

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Valentina looked at him seductively. "I would be delighted to escort you around Tsarskoe Selo this evening," she said in a sultry tone. "It would be an honor to entertain an important dignitary such as yourself, Count Dracula."

Dracula smiled. "How could I refuse such an attractive offer?"

At the conclusion of the state dinner, Dracula thanked his hostess. "Empress Alexandra, thank you for the superb meal. I look forward to conducting our business tomorrow evening."

Alexandra looked surprised. "Tomorrow evening? But I thought we would meet in the morning to discuss—"

Dracula raised his hand in a peremptory motion. "I plan to be out quite late tonight and wish to sleep in tomorrow morning."

Prince Felix Yusupov raised his wine glass to toast Dracula. "A night on the town. You're a man after my own heart, Count Dracula. Before you return to Transylvania, you must come and visit us in St. Petersburg at Moika Palace. I shall treat you to an evening's entertainment you'll not soon forget."

"Perhaps I shall take you up on your generous invitation," Dracula said. "But tonight, I have accepted a previous offer." Dracula reached out and clasped Valentina's hand. She shivered at his icy touch. "Let us take our leave, my dear."

Valentina winked at Alexandra, as she and the count left the palace. They strolled along the banks of Vitlov Pond, following the canals that led from it, admiring the agrestic landscape as they maundered. They paused at the balustrade of the Marble Bridge. Valentina leaned in and kissed Dracula. His lips were chilled and the surprisingly bitter taste was unpleasant, but Valentina carried on with her disingenuous seduction. "I'd like to see this picturesque inn I hear you've chosen to sleep in tonight." She tugged playfully on his ascot. "You've told me you're a man of simple tastes; you are a man and I am a woman. It does not get simpler than that. Allow me to entertain you this evening."

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Dracula grinned. "It has been a while since I've partaken of such delightful entertainment."

Valentina chuckled. "I find it difficult to believe a distinguished count such as yourself is lacking in feminine companionship back home."

"I meet many women for drinks, but our encounters seldom progress beyond that. But tonight shall be different. Tonight, I shall give in to all my urges and desires."

Valentina thought of the sleeping potion in her purse that Alexandra had given her. "Of course, we may still drink this evening, as well."

A slight smile crossed Dracula's face. "Of course. I plan to drink my fill this evening." The count's eyes fell on Valentina's neck. "Come, I shall lead you to the inn."

"More wine?" Valentina refilled Dracula's glass. "Making love always leaves me thirsty." She surreptitiously poured the remainder of Rasputin's sleeping potion into the count's wine and handed him the glass.

Dracula took a sip. "I shall have to complain to the innkeeper. This wine leaves a bitter aftertaste."

"It's hard to appreciate a wine's flavor when one is tired. You had a long trip from Transylvania to Russia, followed by a droll state dinner and quite a bit of walking." Valentina forced a pleasant smile. "Not to mention, an evening of vigorous lovemaking and copious amounts of wine. You must be exhausted. Close your eyes and get some rest."

"Perhaps you're right." Dracula yawned. "I do feel drowsy." He shut his eyes and soon appeared deep in slumber.

Valentina lay beside him, motionless for the next 20 minutes, listening to Dracula's stertorous snoring. When she was convinced Rasputin's potion had rendered Dracula unconscious, Valentina reached over to his hand and grasped the Blood Ring. She tugged on it gently, slowly pulling it along his finger. *A few*

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more seconds, Valentina thought, and she would have the ring and be able to slip out into the night.

Dracula's hand clenched, preventing Valentina from sliding the ring any further. His other hand reached out and grabbed her by the throat, lifting her from the bed. "So, you are a thief."

Valentina tried to speak through her strictured larynx, as Dracula's puissant fingers squeezed her neck. "I thought you were asleep."

Dracula grinned. "I knew if I waited, you would reveal your true motives. I've lived long enough to recognize the taste of poison, but I wished to learn why you would want me dead. I am rather disappointed you would kill me for a mere bauble."

"Poison? It was supposed to be a sleeping potion. He tricked me."

Dracula released his grip. "You profess to be a pawn in a greater scheme? Tell me, who would dare attempt to slay Dracula?"

Valentina realized she had failed in her mission. It was too late to save Alexei and if Rasputin had lied about the potion, then she had reason to doubt the veracity of his claim the Blood Ring could aid the boy. It occurred to her, Rasputin might desire the ring for other purposes and he did not wish to leave open the possibility Dracula might track it down and come after him. As angry as she was at being duped, Valentina knew she had to protect Alexandra, if need be, with her life. "There is no scheme. You are right, I am a thief. But I swear I did not mean to harm you. The Gypsy who sold me the potion claimed it would only put you to sleep."

Dracula studied her face. "I'm not sure if I believe you, Countess Petrovna. But I can learn the truth. Gaze into my eyes," he commanded. "You cannot resist my compulsion. Who supplied you with the poison you slipped into my drink?"

Entranced, Valentina replied, "Rasputin."

Dracula arched an eyebrow. "The czarina's advisor?"

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"He is not her advisor. Alexandra considers Rasputin a friend and relies on him to treat her ailing son."

"Why did you attempt to steal my ring?"

"Rasputin claimed the Blood Ring would enable him to cure Alexei's blood disease. He said it would amplify his own hypnotic powers, which he has been using to treat the boy's hemophilia."

"It can do much more than that. I am aware many Russians, including many prominent ones, are more disdainful of Rasputin than they are of the Romanovs. There's been at least one assassination attempt on the mad monk and even now, I've learned, others plot his demise. But were Rasputin to possess the Blood Ring, he would be able to exercise mind control on an unparalleled level. Even his most ardent, virulent detractors would fall under his sway." Dracula released Valentina from his compulsion.

"But the ring can also save Alexei?"

"That, too."

"Then I beg of you, Count Dracula, use it to save Alexei. Do what you wish with me, but save the boy's life."

"I have no interest in your local politics and even less in performing acts of altruism. But I do take an interest when someone attempts to murder me, even though that is not possible. Rasputin underestimated me. He didn't realize poison would be ineffectual against me."

Valentina saw the malevolence in Dracula's eyes. "You intend to kill him, don't you?"

"Of course," Dracula replied superciliously. "But I shall not make his mistake of underestimating my foe. Even in Romania, there are whispers of the legend of Rasputin and his mysticism. Were he to suspect what I am, he might well have defenses at his disposal. I shall see to his demise, but I believe it best to act through others. We wouldn't want to provoke another international incident in the midst of a world war. Look at the fuss caused by the assassination of a worthless archduke."

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“What do you mean? What are you? What sort of man swallows poison and lives?”

“One cannot poison the undead.” Dracula bared his fangs.

Blood gushed from Valentina’s carotid artery, splattering the white bed linen with red droplets, as the vampire claimed his victim. Dracula drained her body of blood and wiped his lips, sated. From her stupor, as she transitioned from life to undeath, Valentina heard Dracula summon his manservant from the adjoining room.

“Bruno,” he commanded, “place the body in one of the trunks. Tomorrow afternoon, you shall load the trunk containing Countess Petrovna and the one I will be sleeping in onto the coach. I wish us to arrive in St. Petersburg at dusk.” He sat at the desk and pulled a sheet of parchment from the top drawer. Dipping his quill into the inkwell, Dracula penned a letter. “But first, in the morning, you will take this letter to Prince Felix Yusupov, explaining I shall be visiting him at Moika Palace that evening. If what I have learned from the British spy I met last night is true, then Rasputin’s demise will be assured.”

Bruno reined in the horses and steered the carriage to a stop. The windows of Dracula’s royal coach, which had carried the count on his journey to the Russian Empire, were painted black to keep out the sun’s harmful rays. Nonetheless, Dracula and Valentina remained secure in the trunks inside the coach. Bruno stepped inside and knocked on one of the trunks. “Master, dusk has fallen and we are on the outskirts of Moika Palace.”

The trunk lid opened and Dracula stepped out from the confining space. “Excellent. You may proceed to the palace.” As Bruno exited the coach to return to the driver’s seat, Dracula lifted the lid on Valentina’s trunk. “After you have aided me in securing my revenge against Rasputin, I will release you from my compulsion and you shall be free to hunt your own prey tonight and every other night, while I return to my country. Be

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thankful you are but an innocent dupe of the power-hungry monk, else I would not hesitate to drive a stake through your heart once you have served your purpose.”

The coach pulled up to the front of the palace. Dracula stepped out of the carriage, turned, and offered his hand to help Valentina step down. Bruno waited with the coach, while Dracula knocked on the palace door. A servant answered. Dracula bid him to bring his master and inform him Count Dracula had arrived.

“Why do we not wait in the foyer?” Valentina asked. “While I do not feel the bitter winter cold, it makes no sense to stand outside.”

“This is Yusupov’s palace... or one of them, at least. We cannot enter a mortal’s home unless invited inside by its owner. You have much to learn about being a vampire. If you are fortunate, you will learn what you need to survive without stumbling into extinction.”

“Teach me then,” Valentina replied.

“You should be grateful I have allowed you to continue your existence, albeit as one of the undead. Had I not been a vampire, your poison would have slain me. Instead, you shall spend eternity as a cold, heartless outcast, surviving on the blood of those you would have once befriended. That is the extent of Dracula’s mercy.”

Prince Felix Yusupov stepped into the foyer. “Count Dracula, Countess Petrovna, please come in from the cold. You must be freezing.”

“Thank you.” Dracula crossed the threshold, followed by Valentina.

“I’m delighted you accepted my invitation to visit, Count Dracula, but I had not expected you to come so soon,” Yusupov said. “I thought you would be conducting your affairs of state with Czarina Alexandra tonight.”

“The night is young,” Dracula replied. “I shall meet with her later. However, circumstances have arisen that must be attended

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to.” He followed his host into a drawing room decorated with ornate artwork and tapestries. A man stood by the fireplace sipping a snifter of brandy.

“Count Dracula, you recall Grand Duke Dmitri Pavlovich from the state dinner at Alexander Palace last night?”

“Of course,” Dracula replied. “A pleasure to see you again. You are both acquainted with Countess Petrovna?”

A swivel chair that had been facing the fireplace rotated, revealing a familiar figure to the count.

“Ah, my esteemed British acquaintance from the other evening,” Dracula said. “It would appear I have indeed arrived at a most propitious moment.”

“You two have met?” Prince Yusupov asked in astonishment. “This is an old college friend of mine.”

A Cheshire smile crossed Dracula’s face. He recalled his first night in Tsarskoe Selo when he had planned to turn the British espionage agent into his dinner, but the man’s English accent had piqued his curiosity. Dracula had compelled him to reveal why an Englishman was in Russia and learned British intelligence had sent him to recruit locals to assassinate Rasputin. “Briefly,” the vampire replied. “I assume by his presence, we all share the same goal.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Grand Duke Pavlovich replied.

“There’s no need to be disingenuous with me,” Dracula said. “You and Prince Yusupov believe Rasputin wields too much influence at the Russian court, especially with Czarina Alexandra, now that the czar is away at the war front. Our British friend has already confided in me his government fears Rasputin might convince Alexandra to enter into friendlier relations with her native land. As the British are at war with Germany, the last thing they want is an alliance between Russia and Germany. I surmise you gentlemen have met tonight to plot Rasputin’s death.”

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“Count Dracula, political assassination of one so close to the royal court is practically treasonous,” Yusupov said. “I am offended by your implication—”

With a wave of his hand, Dracula dismissed Yusupov’s comment. “Enough dissimulation. Everyone in this room wishes Rasputin dead. I’m here to help our phalanx accomplish that tonight. Tell me, have you conceived a plan?”

Yusupov’s face flushed. “We intend to lure him here, using my wife as bait. The rutting monk is a sybarite possessing an insatiable libido who enjoys all manner of sexual perversions.”

“Although I’m certain your wife possesses unique charms, I believe I can supply better bait to guarantee Rasputin rushes here to his death,” Dracula said. “I have something he wants, something he desires more than any female. Bring Countess Petrovna a pen and paper.”

Yusupov did as Dracula directed. Valentina sat at an escritoire, pen in hand.

“I shall dictate a letter for you to write to your friend, Czarina Alexandra,” Dracula said. “She shall recognize your handwriting and confirm to Rasputin the note is genuine. Begin thusly: *Alexandra, I have obtained the Blood Ring, but at great cost. Dracula knows I have stolen it from him and he is pursuing me. I have fled to St. Petersburg in fear for my life. I cannot return to Tsarskoe Selo; I must get as far away as possible. Yusupov has provided me with shelter for the night but I must disappear by dawn. I realize you cannot travel to St. Petersburg without attracting undue attention, but if you send Rasputin to Moika Palace, then I may give him the Blood Ring before I leave.*’ Sign it as you normally would and Prince Yusupov will have one of his servants deliver your message at once.”

Valentina signed the letter and handed it to Dracula for his approbation. The vampire perused its content and smiled in satisfaction. He folded it and passed it to Prince Yusupov. “I expect Rasputin will embark for Moika Palace immediately upon reading this, so you gentlemen had best be prepared for

Valentina: Days of the Czar

his arrival and actuate your plan for his demise. Perforce, I must go to Alexander Palace to meet with Czarina Alexandra and cement my alibi.” He turned to Valentina. “When your friend notices the Blood Ring on my finger, she will realize you have lied to her. I suspect, once she discovers the mad monk is dead, she will put the pieces together and conclude you played a role in his demise. You might be wise to do as your letter suggests and flee the territory. I trust Prince Yusupov will reward your perfidious betrayal of your dear friend by giving you one of his horses. I suggest you put as many kilometers between yourself and St. Petersburg as you can before sunrise.” Dracula released her from his compulsion.

“You are a bastard,” Valentina seethed, “and should we ever meet again, I shall take revenge for what you’ve done to me and my friend.”

Dracula laughed. “You’re as punky out of bed as you are in it. I admire that in a woman. But you’re hardly in a position to make threats. You’re impecunious, fleeing with only the clothes on your back, and having betrayed your friend, the czarina, you’ll soon have the forces of the Russian Empire at your heels and every peasant from here to Siberia seeking the bounty on your head. That is, assuming you can adapt to your newfound nocturnal lifestyle.” Dracula rubbed the Blood Ring on his finger. “Condign punishment for your foolish attempt at thievery, I would say. Remember to avoid daylight, Countess Petrovna.”

Stalingrad, 1956:

Valentina finished her cigarette and snuffed it out in an ashtray on the table. “Yusupov provided me with one of his horses and I fled into the night. I didn’t know which was worse: having been turned into one of the undead or having betrayed my friend and ensured the death of the one man capable of treating her ailing son. It sickens me to imagine the scene that

Fangs & Fur: Flashbacks

night in Alexander Palace when Alexandra's eyes eventually fell upon the Blood Ring on Dracula's hand and she realized my inexpiable perfidy. But by then, Rasputin had already arrived at Yusupov's palace in St. Petersburg. The conspirators told him I was upstairs with Yusupov's wife and while Rasputin waited, they fed him cyanide laced cakes. The poison was as ineffective with Rasputin as it had been with Dracula. Out of frustration, they shot him, and dumped his body in the river. I feared with Rasputin gone, Alexei would not live long, for there would be no one to save him the next time the bleeding returned; and I could not see how Alexandra could go on without her beloved son. Of course, such concerns were all mooted when the entire royal family was assassinated."

"Do you resent the Soviets for that?" The KGB agent asked.

Valentina shrugged. "It was a long time ago. I no longer concern myself with human emotions such as resentment. My primary concern since becoming a vampire has been with my own survival."

"I appreciate your forthrightness. I now understand why you could not return to the royal court or even your own noble roots. I imagine you preferred to keep a low profile, at first to hide from the Russian Empire that considered you a traitor and later to hide from the Bolsheviks who were killing all with noble blood."

"Is that to be my fate now? Is it your duty to wipe out the last of the bloodline?"

The KGB agent lit another cigarette. "Forty years ago, you would have been executed perfunctorily out of fear royalists would seek to put any surviving member of the royal bloodline, no matter how distant, back on the imperial throne. But today, there is little chance of that happening. There is no resistance to the Soviet state. We are in firm control. Besides, I doubt even royalists, if any still existed, would choose to have a vampire rule them. Yet, I remain curious about one thing. You've had forty years to leave Russia. Why are you still here?"

Valentina: Days of the Czar

Valentina sighed. "Russia is my home. I know there is a wide world outside its borders, but this is where I was born. I am a Russian. Our land, and the Russian culture and people are an inseparable part of me. I cannot turn my back on the motherland; it is the last tie to my long gone humanity."

The KGB agent nodded. "I believe you are a loyal Russian. But are you also a loyal Soviet citizen?"

Valentina shrugged. "Is there a difference, these days? One thing I've learned, as a vampire who faces an eternity of existence before her, is that times change and one must keep up with the times."

"These are difficult times, Comrade. The KGB was created as an espionage apparatus. It is an intriguing prospect to have a vampire as an agent. Imagine a spy who can turn to mist to avoid capture, fly into high-security facilities disguised as a bat, and use her hypnotic powers to interrogate subjects and extract the truth from them. You could be extremely valuable to us. It would be quite wasteful to have to destroy you. If you agree to work for us, the KGB will supply you with all the blood you need and protect you during the daylight. We would give you the same training our best agents receive. The only questions are whether you will agree to work for us and whether we can trust you."

Valentina gazed out the window. "It'll be dawn, soon. I accept your terms. I suggest we depart now, before the rising sun turns me to dust. As for whether you can trust me, does the KGB truly trust anyone, Comrade?"

The KGB agent smiled. "I believe we have come to an understanding, Comrade."



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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

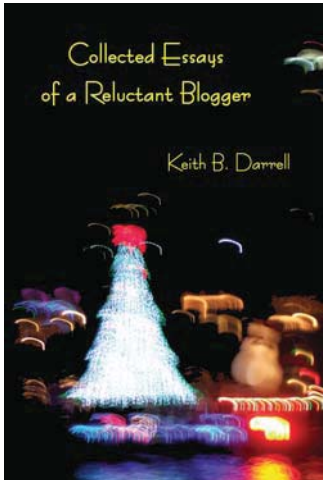
agent, Web designer, attorney, and author. In 2005, Darrell founded Amber Book Company and wrote its flagship title, *Issues in Internet Law: Society, Technology, and the Law*, which is now in its 10th edition and has been adapted as a textbook by colleges and universities worldwide. Darrell's legal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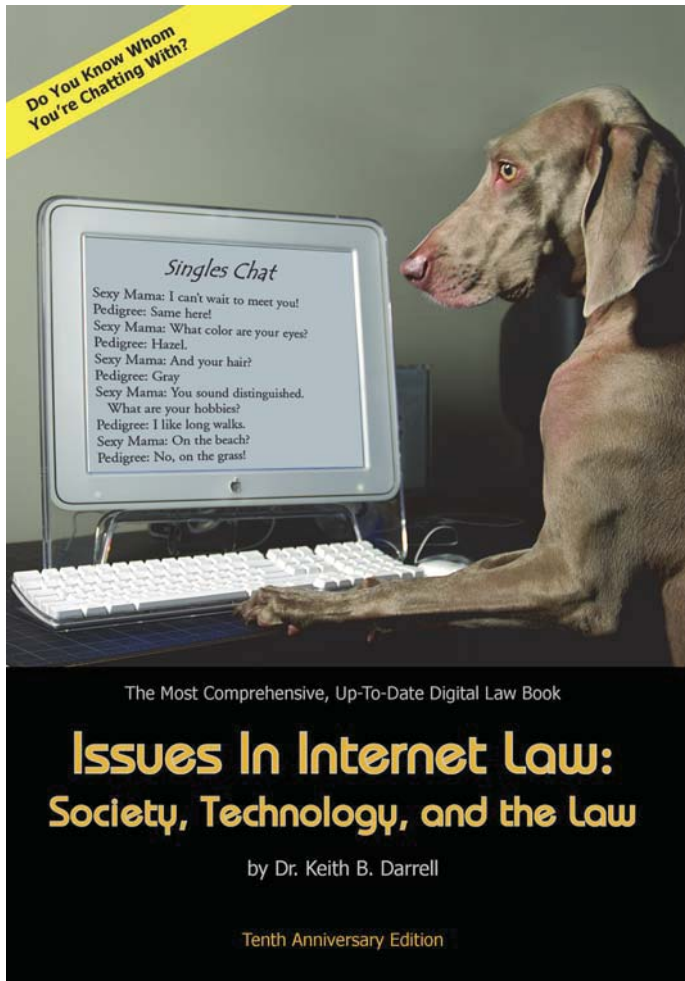
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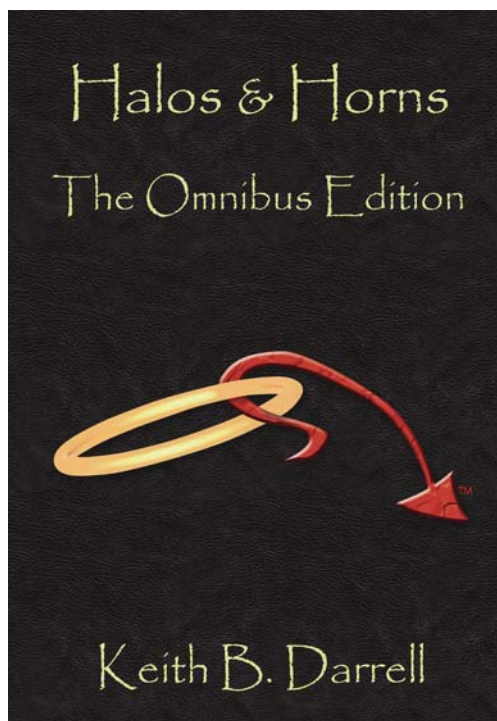
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The Halos & Horns Fantasy Saga

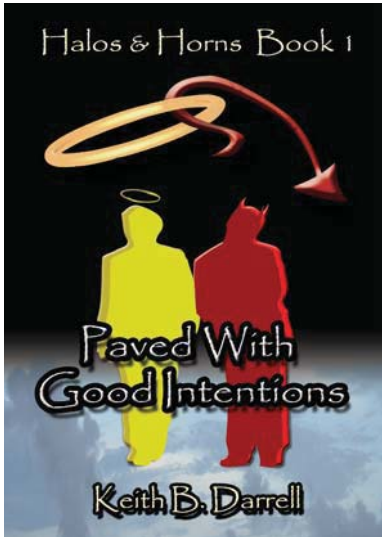
Exiled on Earth, naive angel Gabriel and amoral demon Lucifer, in the human guise of “Gabe Horn” and “Lou Cypher”, form an unlikely partnership as private investigators in Las Vegas. Their adventures take them across the seven heavenly realms, into the nine levels of Hell, through the dream realm of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

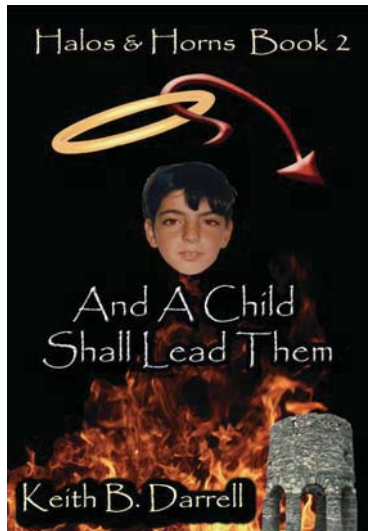
In Book 4, the angel Gabriel and the demon Asmodeus fight for their lives against usurper Baphomet and his demonic horde in his bid to take dominion of Hell; Lucifer faces judgment before the Eternals for murder; and Samantha Twitch joins forces with her sisters, witches Drusilla and Calliope, against 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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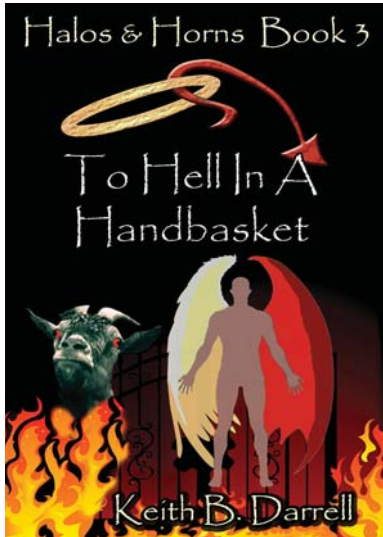
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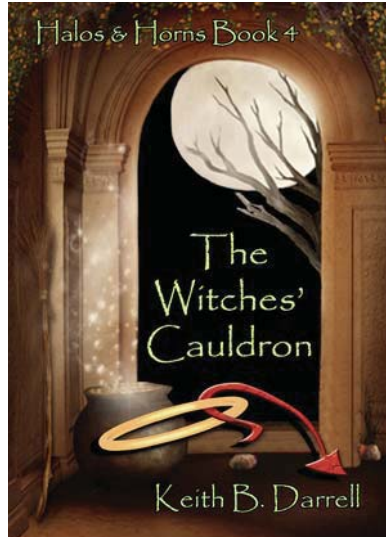
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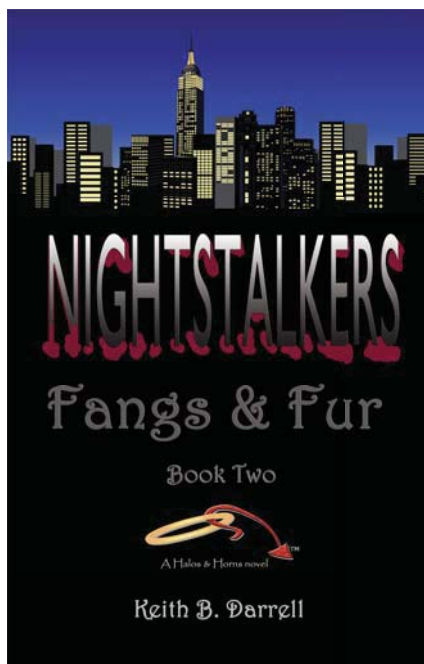
Pandora's a carefree party girl who just happens to be a vampire. With her best friend Sharon Mordecai, a hybrid vampire; her boyfriend Cody Fenris, a werewolf; and Cody's sister Lupe, who transforms into a wolf, they run Nightstalkers, Inc., a private detective agency. Pandora and Sharon also belong 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?

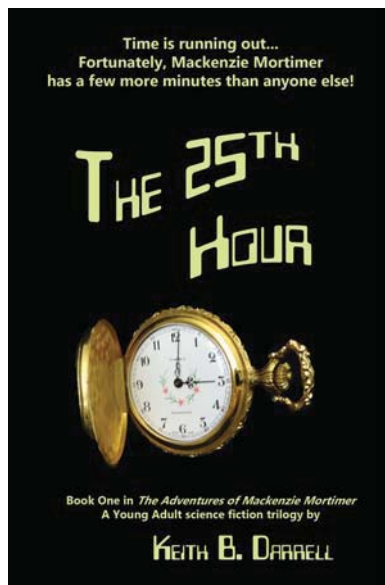
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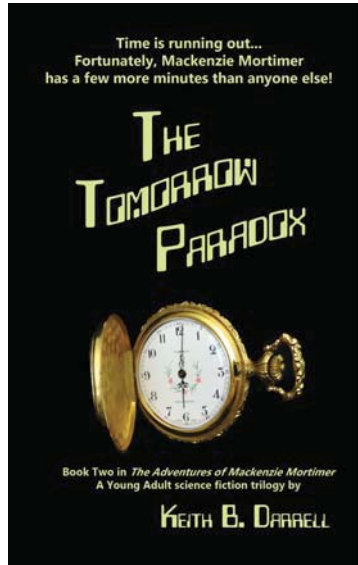


Mackenzie Mortimer is a typical junior high geek: shy, awkward, late with his homework, and always late for class. He's never got enough time to do everything he needs; after all, there are only 24 hours in a day. But when Mac finds his grandfather's pocket watch, he discovers his days have an extra 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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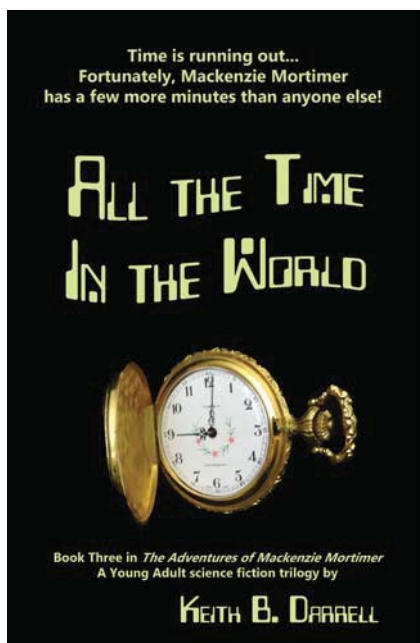
Mackenzie Mortimer's troubles are just beginning! With his pocket watch destroyed, Mackenzie finds himself a stranger in a strange land, surrounded by familiar people he doesn't really know, with only Gemma, a 15-year-old clone, to guide him through the labyrinth of the future. Will the mysterious black, 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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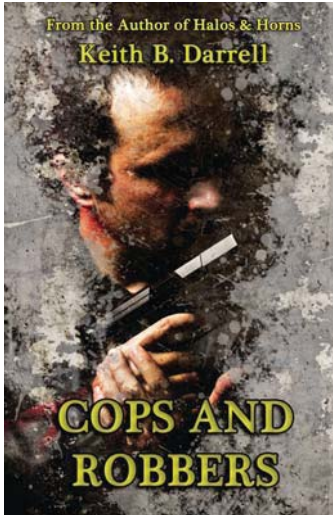
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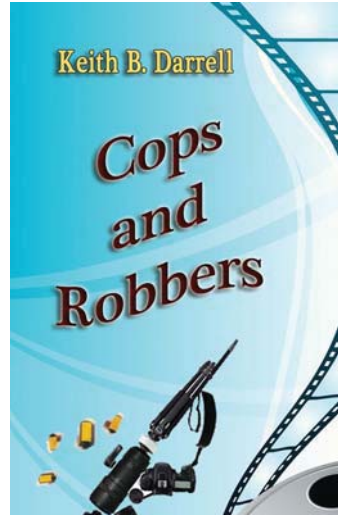
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COPS AND ROBBERS



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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.