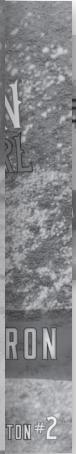
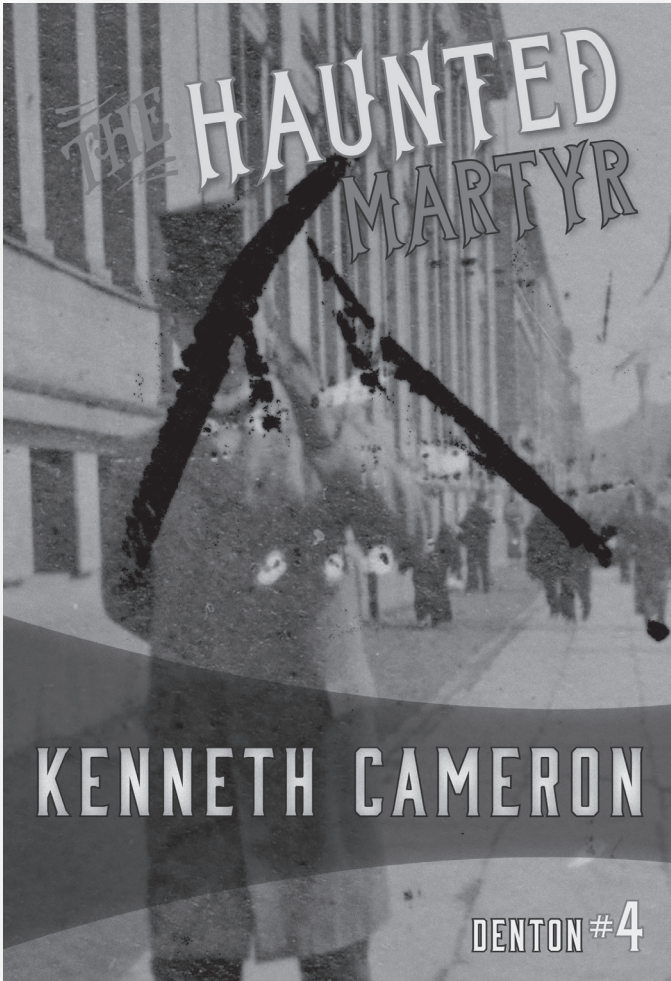


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CHAPTER
1

‘Sunny Italy,’ he said.

The rain was pelting down, hammering the high windows and the little walled terrace beyond.

She said, ‘It’s bound to change.’

He made a rude noise, something between a laugh and a spit. ‘I dragged you here because you’re supposed to have a warm climate. It’s freezing!’

‘If it were freezing, Denton, it wouldn’t be raining.’

‘Janet—!’ He scowled at her. ‘Don’t quibble with me.’

She smiled at him, a hint of the adult smiling at a child. She had a face more intelligent than handsome, filling out now after an almost fatal bout of typhus but still with shadows under the violet eyes, the left side marked by a scar that ran from temple to jawbone. Her long hair was worn loose, pulled back a little with a tortoise-shell band over the top of her head, no effort made to hide the scar.

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What was to be noticed first about her, however, were her clothes—bright-colored lavenders and turquoise today, vaguely medieval, flowing, as if she had stepped out of a Pre-Raphaelite painting, and with no corset on. She looked fifty years behind the fashion, or perhaps ahead of it. Either way, she looked unusual, probably eccentric, unsettling to the mass of women who wore the new corsets that pulled their spines into a concave curve and thrust their torsos forward so that they looked as if they might fall over on them. She said, ‘I don’t like you reminding me that it’s my fault we’re here.’

‘It isn’t your fault!’ He rattled the paper of a letter he was reading and then leaned his head on his left hand. ‘I should have taken you somewhere farther south. Greece. Egypt.’

‘Oh, Egypt!’ She made it sound as if Egypt couldn’t be taken seriously. ‘Your real trouble is you miss Atkins.’

‘I don’t anything of the kind.’

‘You’ve had a letter from him and it’s made you grumpy.’

‘It hasn’t made me grumpy!’ Atkins—ex-Sergeant Atkins, British Army—had for years been his servant, the two of them an odd pairing: Denton, an American who had never before in his life had a servant, reluctant to have somebody wait on him; Atkins, a former soldier-servant, eager to move up. Atkins had dreams of independence; Denton had encouraged him; now Atkins had chosen to leave his service, stay in London and go into the wax recording business. He had, however, agreed to stay in his old quarters for the present to keep somebody in Denton’s house. ‘Atkins sounds happy,’ Denton said miserably. ‘He’s sold almost a thousand recordings of his comic song.’ The truth was, he did miss Atkins. The truth was, he’d hoped that ‘I’m a Knut, the K-nuttiest One of All’ wouldn’t sell a single recording and Atkins would be begging to join him in Naples.

Denton looked at the remains of an Italian’s notion of breakfast as if he were looking at the ruins of his hopes: a plate of hard bread cut into inch-thick slices; a pot of milky coffee, now empty; a large bowl of an orange jam that was supposed to be marmalade. He wanted fried eggs and bacon.

‘He’s your best friend,’ she said.

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'I paid him extra *not* to be my best friend.'

'And you miss him.'

'I don't! Well, of course I do, but it isn't—It's this goddam living out of a trunk. I'm sick of living in a *pensione* with a lot of females who treat me like a menace and you like a fallen woman. I can't work here!' He was supposed to be writing a book on the spooks and spirits of Naples. He seemed unable to start.

'I *am* a fallen woman. If it's so unsettling here, why don't you go out? Go see that man from the International Society of whatever it is.'

'Super-Normal Investigation. His letters make him sound like an idiot.'

'You've got to see him some time; you said he's *the* authority on mediums.' She was studying an Italian grammar. 'Sophie wrote down some "useful phrases" for me, and I can't find them in my book. How am I supposed to learn if they're not in my book? I'm not like you, Denton, able to learn Italian out of the air.' She looked at a slip of paper. 'What do you suppose "*va fa n'cula*" really means? Sophie said it's a kind of greeting, but I'd like to—Why are you laughing?'

'Because it means "in your arse".'

'It doesn't.'

'The Italians I knew in the West used to say "Vafangoola". Same thing. "Va" is go; "fa", do it; "n" I think is a kind of dialect for "in the"; "cula" is arse. Actually, I think it's ruder than "in your arse". "Do it in your arse". "Up your arse". One of those. And I don't learn Italian out of the air; I once spent a year running a rail gang of Italians, and I paid one of them an extra dollar a week to teach me their lingo.'

'Sophie's a naughty little bitch.' She slammed her dictionary shut. 'She was having a joke! I didn't think she knew what a joke is.' Sophie was a whore in a famous London house; Janet often visited her friend the madame, Mrs Castle, there, had in fact once worked there herself.

'Well, look on the bright side: now you know how to insult somebody. You might use it on Mrs Newcombe.' Mrs Sylvester

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Newcombe, as she called herself, was a manufacturer's wife from Rochester, New York, who was staying in the same *pensione* and who, as Janet quoted, 'knew the price of everything and the value of nothing', and always in what she called 'daalars' in a hard, nasal voice: *This tea gown cost me seventy-nine daalars in Paris.* Now Denton said, 'Put on your best smile, sing out, "*Vafancoola*, Mrs Newcombe," when she gives you one of her looks.'

'Unfortunately, I don't think she'd know what it means, even if I translated for her. Mrs Newcombe believes that ignorance is the foundation of good society, which makes you wonder how she ever had that rather sweet daughter.'

'Whom she means to keep as ignorant as a newborn pup, which is why she has forbidden the daughter to see you. Also why she gives you those looks. I'm really sick of Mrs Newcombe. And this goddam *pensione*!'

'I wonder what she tells Lucy. That I'm a former whore? I wonder how she gets that into words.' Unusually for her, Janet slipped into an excruciatingly nasal American accent and a rather flutey voice, her idea of Mrs Newcombe. 'Oh, Lucy, that awful Mrs Striker used to be a lady of the night!'

'Maybe we ought to go back to bed and forget the rain.'

'Lucy's bringing her friend to look at my dresses once she's got rid of her mother. And you're supposed to see that man about a house.'

'Oh, cripes, Lucy and a pal, giggling and screaming. Is it the plump one who thinks she's a comedy soubrette?'

'Mmm, Harriet. Her mother's the very fat one with the eyeglass.'

'And her daughter too homely to attract some measly Italian *conte* to drag back to the States. I'd feel sorry for the girls if they weren't so silly.' He threw himself back in his chair, tilted the coffee pot over his cup to establish that it was still empty, and sighed. 'Frioni wants to show me more *palazzi* up on the Vomero hill where the swells live. I can't get it through his head that we don't want to live up there. He gives me a superior smile every time I tell him I want to live in *Naples*. The last time I said, "I

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know what I want, Frioni,” he said, “No, signore, you don’t.” He made a face. ‘One more week of it and we head for Egypt.’

‘*You* may head for Egypt if you like.’

He started to speak, thought better of it. She had made it clear from the beginning that he could not tell her what to do. She would never be his wife, in good part for that reason. The truth was that he wanted her more than she wanted him, and manoeuvring around that truth had become part of their relationship, even a kind of conspiracy between them. ‘You know what I mean,’ he said, his voice suddenly gentle. She had had typhus; she had almost died; he had only to remember that to become gentle.

She said, ‘I intend to stay in Naples and enjoy myself and study my Italian grammar and wait for better weather.’

He exhaled noisily. ‘I can’t work in this damned place, all the coming and going—stupid adolescent females—their damned mothers—’

‘Are you having a tantrum, Denton? Let me know if you’re going to throw things.’

He stared at her, got the top of her head. She had lowered her face over her book again. He wanted to be angry, angrier than he already was. He wanted, in fact, to throw something. That coffee pot would do—His hand actually started towards it, the movement a kind of jerk, and he thought, *I’m having a tantrum, am I? And then, She’s right. I am.*

His hand dropped to his lap. He faced the truth: it wasn’t the weather; it wasn’t the girls; it wasn’t their mothers. It was coming here with something wrong between them; it was having to stay in a place where they couldn’t be themselves, as if they’d had to rent masks along with the rooms. And it was not being able to get started on the new book. He’d contracted to write two before he left London; one had seemed easy enough—*The Ghosts of Naples*, about hauntings and séances—but once on the spot he wondered what he’d been thinking of. The other, a novel, was in bits and snippets in his head, not yet come together.

Denton had lived for most of a decade in London; he wrote about Americans and America, but he liked the alien-

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ation of being an expatriate. He liked the writer's life and, so far, the successful writer's income, and he didn't want to go back to any of the things he had had to do before to make a living: soldier, farmer, lawman, drifter, prison guard, railroad honcho, Wild West show *pistolero*, vagrant, drunk. At fifty, he looked as if all those things had left their tracks on his face, but he had young, ferocious eyes; between them, a huge nose stuck out and hooked over a grey moustache that hung down both sides of his mouth.

'I'll get dressed,' he said. He was wearing an old quilted smoking jacket over corduroy rat-catchers, on his feet moccasins he had got someplace in the West; they had holes in the soles and were falling apart.

'I want to go to the university today,' she said. She was taking a degree in economics at London's University College; she had made an arrangement to study in Naples while she was recuperating.

'I'll go with you. If I finish with the house man in time.'

'You're supposed to see the man from the Society for what's-it.'

'Not yet. No—I can't concentrate.' Denton ran a hand over his bristly hair. 'Fiction's so much easier to write. You don't have to talk to people.'

'Meanwhile, you have to find us a house.'

'Not with Frioni. I may finish with him this morning. In fact, I may finish with him right off. I *will* finish with him right off. Tell him I'll find my own damned house. I'm sick of him. To hell with him.'

'And how shall we find a house?'

“The weather will change, or the wood will come.”

'When I said something like that, you took my head off.'

He kissed her. 'Never. Never.' With his face still close to hers, he said, 'You *will* lie down and rest after you go to the university—hmm?'

She pulled his head down and whispered in his ear. 'You're not my mother.'

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‘You’ve been sick!’ He looked at her with the helplessness of the one who loves too much. ‘Oh, the hell with it.’

He went to his own room (they had separate bedrooms with a sitting room between, rather a mirror of their London arrangement, where they lived in separate houses with back gardens and a gate between) and dressed—a dark brown lounge suit that buttoned very high, waistcoated; a soft-collared shirt, contrary to fashion, no Atkins to scold him about it; a heavy silk tie he’d picked up here in Naples, far too thick and decorated to please Atkins; and a Naples-bought soft hat that would have appalled him. Dark brown brogues, London-made, just right for a downpour. When he came out of the dressing room, he could hear female voices: the girls had arrived. *Judas Priest*. He hesitated at the sitting-room door, trying to think of what he’d say to pretty Lucy and her overweight friend Harriet, daughter of Mrs Rufus Guttmann of Canandaigua, New York, Mr Guttmann being said to be ‘in dry goods’.

Harriet Guttmann saved him by not giving him a chance to speak. ‘And lo, the lord and master cometh!’ she cried. Lucy giggled, and the plump one guffawed and said, ‘Huzza and hello, she cried as she waved her wooden leg!’

Denton smiled and started to mutter something about going out. Janet said the young ladies had come to look at dresses. Lucy said, ‘Oh, I adore your clothes, Mrs Striker! So French and so *au courant*! Is this one by Brulant? He’s all flowing lines and colour now, you know, quite shocking to the stick-in-the-muds.’

‘Like our sainted mothers,’ the other one said. She added that she was so excited her breath was coming in long gasps and short pants. The two young women screamed with laughter. Denton fled.

He had brought a hooded ulster and the new Italian hat (to be protected by the hood if necessary) from the bedroom. Headed for the *pensione*’s door, he wondered if he needed an umbrella and veered towards the closet that served as reception. To his surprise, the middle-aged woman on duty there said, ‘You have a visitor,’ the words heavily accented—no *h* in ‘have’, the *-or* in visitor given pride of place. As he didn’t know anybody in Naples

except Frioni, he supposed the house agent had come to save him a walk in the rain; he tried to work his anger up again, preparing to fire the man. 'Where?' he said.

'In the lounge room.' *In de lounge-eh rum*. She pointed. The *pensione* took up two floors of a fairly sizeable building, had a history of satisfying English and American travellers of a certain kind, which had turned out not to include Denton. Thus, the place had local interpretations of certain English rooms—a lounge, a breakfast room, a writing room, a smoking room, even a boxroom. God knows what the Neapolitans actually called them.

The lounge looked like every other room in the place, no more suggesting lounging than it suggested gymnastics: dated, over-elaborate furniture; faded fabrics; lamps and flower stands of bronze or something that looked like bronze; a lot of classical reference in engravings and bric-a-brac. In one corner was a square chair made to fit against the walls, its arms ending in ferocious dogs' heads that looked as if they were protecting the seat. Perched on it was not Frioni the house agent but a little man in a soaking-wet brown garment that was lifted just far enough off the floor to show leather sandals and bare feet that hadn't been washed in so long they had a kind of brown varnish. The robe, if that's what it was, was cinched around his waist with what might once have been curtain cord.

As Denton went closer, he realised that the man smelled. And that he was old and bald except for long, greasy hair at the back that looked as if it had been glued on. Denton reviewed his scatty Italian and put together the words '*Sono Denton. Vo'mi parlare?*' That wasn't right, but close enough.

The little man, now standing, came only to Denton's shoulder. His face, although grubby and lined, was delicate, almost childlike. He said, 'You don't need to speak Italian, unless of course you want to, and it must be a burden, as you don't speak it at all well.' His voice was also old, rather husky, but the accent was of the most upper-crust and annoying British kind. 'I am Gerald Sommers. I wish to report that I am haunted.'

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Oh, Lord, a lunatic. ‘I’m afraid, um, Mr—’

‘Brother. Or *Fra*. I am mostly called Fra Geraldo in Spagnuoli.’

‘Fra.’ That explained the robe and the sandals, although Denton didn’t think anybody actually dressed that way any more except in cobbled-up paintings of boozing monks. ‘Mmm, well, Fra, I don’t deal in... I mean, are you sure you have the right man?’

‘Are you not the person who is writing a book about Neapolitan hauntings?’

The local newspapers, glad for copy, had published articles about him and his planned book. And now, like one of the ghosts he hadn’t located yet, it had come back to haunt him. Denton said, ‘I’m *planning* something like that, yes, but...’

‘Well, then: I am being haunted.’

‘Mm, well, um, why don’t we meet sometime and I can take notes. If it’s useful for the book, I’d of course put it in.’

The little man’s head quivered and he said, ‘I don’t give a rap for your book! I’m haunted and they’re trying to *kill* me!’ Denton was scrabbling for a way to get rid of him when the man went on, ‘Are you Texas Jack or aren’t you?’

Denton sighed.

Almost thirty years before, he had killed four men when he had been the marshal of a little Nebraska town. That story still rode his shoulders, an inescapable moment of notoriety that every newspaper had to mention. The urchins of Naples had turned it into ‘Texas Jack,’ although his name wasn’t Jack and he had never been in Texas. He supposed they had got it from Wild Bill Cody’s sometime pal, Texas Jack Omohundro. Now he couldn’t walk the Naples streets without some kid’s screaming the name at him. It said something for the grapevine that twisted through the city’s meanest streets: the kids couldn’t read, but they knew who he was and what he’d done. He said, ‘That’s a mistake. A misunderstanding.’

‘Do you kill bad people with your six-guns or don’t you?’

‘I did, um, get rid of some bad men with a, mm, shotgun. Once upon a time. Long ago. I don’t go around shooting people, Fra Renaldo.’

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‘Geraldo, my name is *Gerald*. Renaldo is *Spanish*.’ For a monk—if that was what he was—he was decidedly testy; or didn’t monasticism necessarily make people nicer? ‘I’ve lived here for donkey’s years, far longer than I ever I lived in England, and people call me Fra *Geraldo*.’ His voice softened. ‘Fifty years. England is like a child’s dream to me now. Children dream sweet dreams, don’t they. Dreams of innocence. That is my England, innocence and beauty, always summer and always sunshine. I shall never go back.’ His eyes had filled with tears. ‘You live in London, I suppose. Horrible place. It’s hell. If I go to hell, it will be London. Don’t you think?’

Denton liked London; he skipped the comparison with hell. ‘Are you being haunted by actual ghosts—things you can see and hear, or...? How are they trying to kill you?’

‘I hear them. Laughing. Singing. Cruel children. They shouldn’t laugh at me. I try. I’ve tried for fifty years. No, forty-seven years. Atonement. If we atone...’ His voice trailed off, then recovered. ‘They put things in my way. So I shall fall and be hurt. They mean to kill me and send me to hell.’ His left hand, surprisingly strong, gripped Denton’s arm. ‘They mustn’t be let do it! I must not be haunted when I am atoning!’

Denton felt both disgust and pity. The hand that held him was wrinkled and had a bloom of dirt across the back; the robe or cassock or whatever it was had dribbles of what was probably food down the front; the smell was nasty; and the face, intense now, had creases like knife-cuts down the cheeks and around the mouth, all of them dark with old dirt as if they’d been drawn with a soft pencil.

People were always asking Denton for help—some residue of the dime novels about his long-ago killings, ‘the man who saved a town’—and he always tried to resist them. And usually failed. He had a hard mind but sometimes a soft heart, at least for the weak and the victimised. If some rotten kids were tormenting this old man, with his foolish fantasies of hell and innocence and redemption, how, Denton thought, could he refuse at least moral support? Atkins, alas, was not there to tell him to use his

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head, write his book, make money, and tell the old man to hop it. He said, 'I'm meeting somebody now, but maybe we could get together later. In the afternoon?'

'I have my rounds to make. Then prayers. Then vespers. Why do you think I came to you now? I don't have all day to swan about like some, you know.'

Denton reclaimed his arm. 'This evening?'

'I do my flagellations in the evening. Oh, well, I suppose if it must be, so it must. You're quite thoughtless, however. Religious devotion is nothing to you, I suppose. Come about eight.'

Eight would be the middle of the *pensione's* evening meal. 'I suppose we couldn't make it a little—'

'No we could not!'

Denton, impatient himself now, said, 'Where?'

'The Palazzo Minerva, of course! Ask anybody. Next to the little church they call the Vecchio Catedrale, though of course it isn't. It's old, very old, but never the cathedral; that's nonsense. Just walk up any of the streets in Spagnuoli and ask for the Palazzo Minerva; they'll direct you. I'm very well known. Please don't be late. I shall have to put off my scourgings until after, and I do dislike going to bed with my wounds fresh.'

The little man sniffed, then looked around the lounge. 'This is how your sort of people live when they come to Napoli, is it? It's terribly vulgar.' He gathered his skirts about himself and hurried out, his sandals flapping on the terrazzo floor. Denton waited until he was gone and then went out after him, hoping he was far enough behind not to run into him again. He was already regretting having listened to the man. It was always the way. *If Atkins were here, he'd say something acid. 'Going to be made a sap of again, is it?'* Denton sighed. Janet was right: he missed Atkins.

He pulled on the heavy ulster and put the hood up over his new hat. Without thinking, he patted a pocket to make sure his derringer was there, but of course it wasn't; this was Italy, and they wouldn't allow him to have a gun. Even before he'd left London, the Italian consul had said that his 'history with fire-arms' was well known; if he tried to take guns into Italy, he'd

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be stopped, the guns confiscated. He could of course apply for a permit; approval for a foreigner took about a year. Denton and Janet planned to stay five months.

When he stepped outside the *pensione*, he found that the sun was shining.

‘Oh, dammit.’

He ran back upstairs and threw the ulster into the concierge’s closet. When he got downstairs again, a light drizzle had started.