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Opening extract from

The Case of the Deadly Desperados

Written by

Caroline Lawrence

Published by

Orion Children's Books

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THE WESTERN MYSTERIES

The Case of the Deadly Desperados

Also by Caroline Lawrence

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II The Secrets of Vesuvius
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V The Dolphins of Laurentum
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VIII The Gladiators from Capua
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From Ostia to Alexandria with Flavia Gemina

THE WESTERN MYSTERIES

The Case of the Deadly Desperados

Caroline Lawrence

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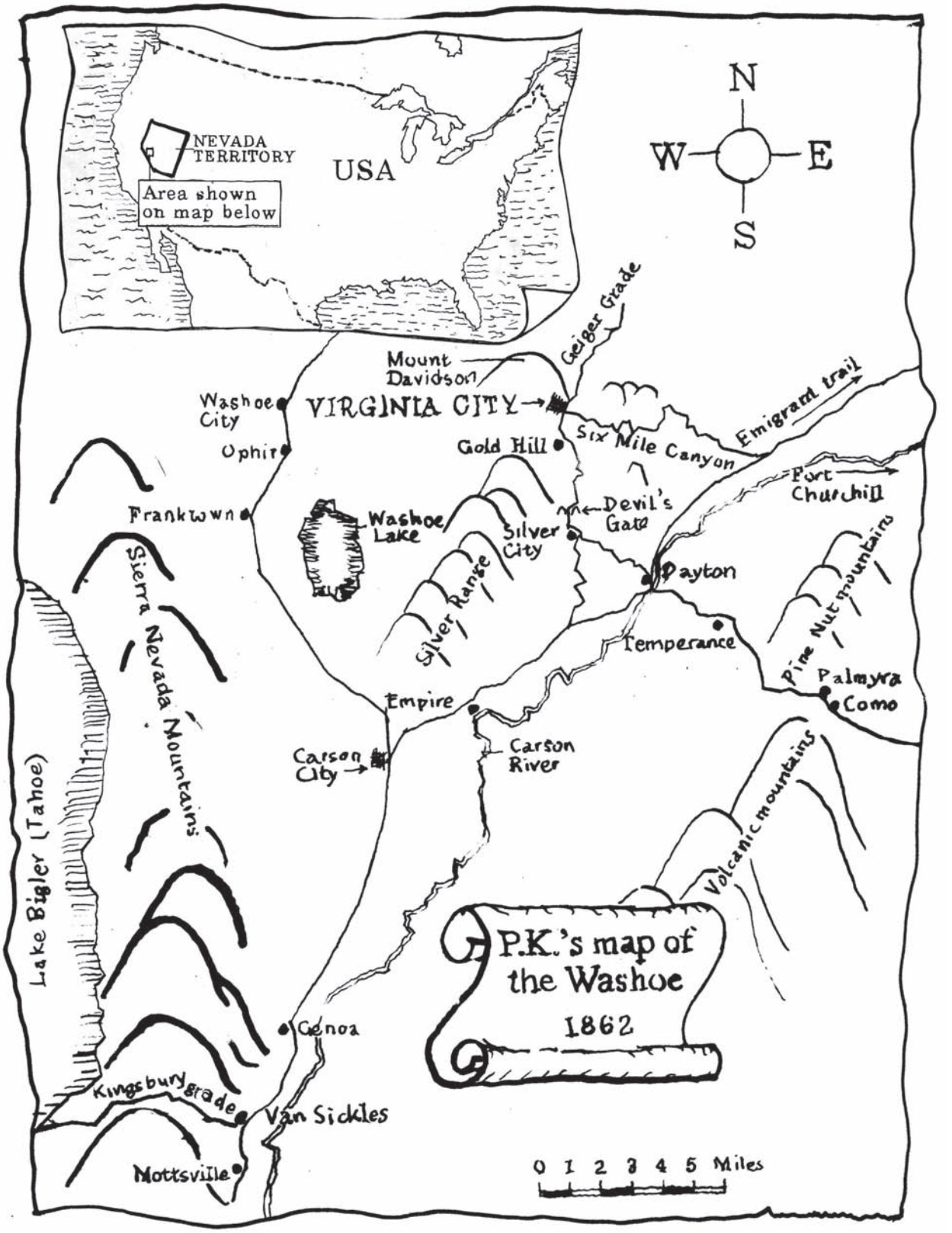
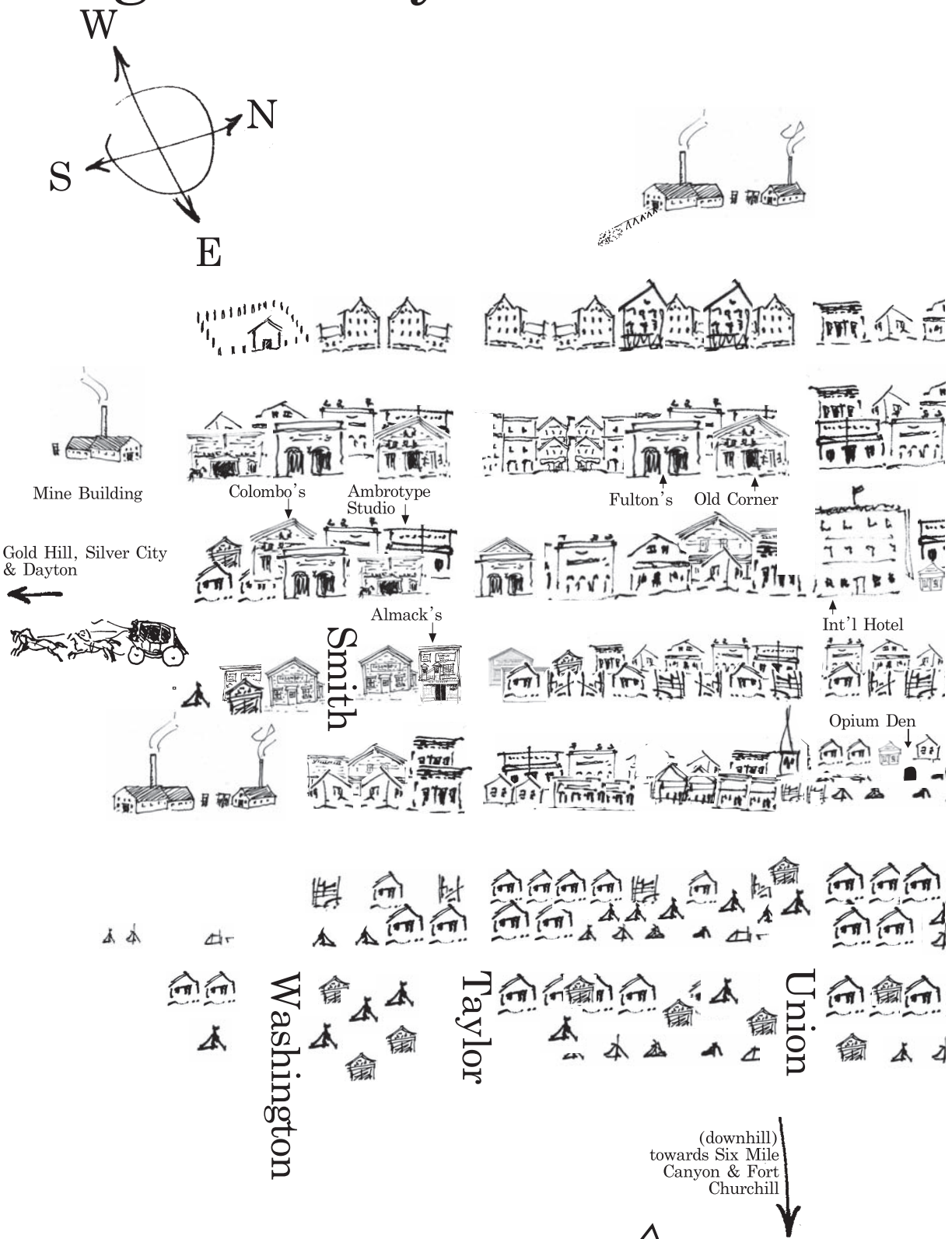
To my friend Penny, who started me on this dusty trail
when she gave me a copy of *True Grit* by Charles Portis


NEVADA TERRITORY
USA
Area shown on map below
N
W
E
S
Geiger Grade
Mount Davidson
VIRGINIA CITY
Washoe City
Ophir
Gold Hill
Six Mile Canyon
Emigrant trail
Fort Churchill
Devil's Gate
Franktown
Washoe Lake
Silver City
Silver Range
Dayton
Sierra Nevada Mountains
Pine Nut mountains
Temperance
Palmyra
Como
Empire
Carson City
Carson River
Volcanic mountains
Lake Bigler (Tahoe)
P.K.'s map of the Washoe
1862
Genoa
Kingsbury grade
Van Sickles
Mottsville
0 1 2 3 4 5 Miles

Virginia City in 1862



Mount Davidson
towards peak of Mount Davidson (uphill)
Mexican Mine
Territorial Enterprise
Recorder's
A St.
B St.
Notary Public
Virginia Hotel
C St.
D St.
half-built house
(Chinatown)
E St.
F St.
Sutton
Mill
Carson
Mine Building
Mine Building

FOREWORD

My great-grandmother Gertrude Corinne Prince was born in Battle Mountain, Nevada in 1877, one of six brothers and sisters. Her father was a teamster (a mule-train driver) and for this reason the Prince family soon moved to Sutro, Nevada: a town near the great silver mines of the Comstock. As a young woman, Corinne worked in the Carson City Mint before moving to join her family in Olympia, Washington. She later married and finally ended up in southern California. After her death at the ripe old age of 99, some ledger books were recovered from a dark corner of her attic.

On one of my recent visits home to California, I was helping my mother have a clear-out and we came across these dusty ledger books, still bound with a faded blue ribbon. We were about to throw them out, but untied the ribbon to have a quick look first. Imagine our surprise on discovering that they were not boring financial

entries, but exciting accounts written by a twelve-year-old detective living in Virginia City during the early days of the silver boom. My mother could not explain how her grandmother acquired them; they have nothing to do with our family and were apparently written fifteen years before Corinne Prince was born. Despite their mysterious origins, I have decided to publish these journals. They are a fascinating glimpse of life in the 'Wild West' during the time of the American Civil War, 150 years ago.

I have made as few editorial changes as possible, mainly replacing terms which might be offensive to modern readers. I have retained most of the misspellings, abbreviations, ampersands, etc. Because some of the slang words and technical terms might be unfamiliar, I have added an illustrated glossary at the back of this book. The illustrations are by my husband Richard, based on the work of a young African American artist of the 19th century, Grafton T. Brown, who is mentioned in these ledger sheets. There is also a map of Virginia City as it might have been in September of 1862.

In the early 1860s, newspapers in the western territories often published made-up stories as if they were the truth. One reporter guilty of this was a certain Sam Clemens, who also appears in this account. Some of his 'news stories' were utterly outrageous but nonetheless got him into trouble because people believed them. He finally had to flee Nevada because of one of these 'tall tales'. As a Virginia City reporter, Clemens tried out

several pen-names, but the one he finally settled on was Mark Twain.

I am not certain if the following account is actually true, or just a 'tall tale' like one of Mark Twain's. I will leave that for you to judge.

Caroline Lawrence
London, England, 2011

LEDGER SHEET 1

My name is P.K. Pinkerton and before this day is over I will be dead.

I am trapped down the deepest shaft of a Comstock silver mine with three desperados closing in on me.

Until they find me, I have my pencil & these ledger sheets and a couple of candles. If I write small & fast, I might be able to write an account of how I came to be here. Then whoever finds my body will know the unhappy events that led to my demise.

And they will also know who done it.

This is what I would like my tombstone to say:

P.K. PINKERTON

BORN IN HARD LUCK, SEPTEMBER 26, 1850

DIED IN VIRGINIA CITY, SEPTEMBER 28, 1862

'YE ARE ALL ONE IN CHRIST JESUS' GALATIANS 3:28

R.I.P.

My foster ma Evangeline used to say that when God gives you a Gift he always gives you a Thorn in your side to keep you humble.

My Gift is that I am real smart about certain things.

I can read & write and do any sum in my head. I can speak American & Lakota and also some Chinese & Spanish. I can shoot a gun & I can ride a pony with or without a saddle. I can track & shoot & skin any game and then cook it over a self-sparked fire. I know how to cure a headache with a handful of weeds.

I can hear a baby quail in the sage-brush or a mouse in the pantry.

I can tell what a horse has been eating just by the smell of his manure.

I can see every leaf on a cottonwood tree.

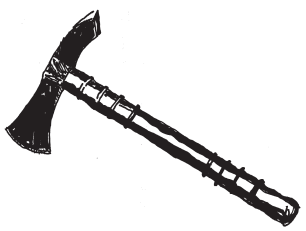
But here is my Problem: I cannot tell if a person's smile is genuine or false. I can only spot three emotions: happiness, fear & anger. And sometimes I even mix those up.

Also, sometimes I do not recognize someone I have met before. If they have grown a beard or their hair is different then I get confused.

That is my Thorn: people confound me.

And now my Thorn has got me killed.

LEDGER SHEET 2



It all started the day before yesterday, on September 26th. I came home from school & walked into our one-room cabin to the smell of scalded milk & the sight of things thrown everywhere. I closed the door behind me & stepped forward. It was only then that I saw my foster parents lying on the floor in a pool of blood.

They had both been scalped & they appeared to be dead.

I ran to ma first. She was holding the big iron skillet and it had some hair & blood on it so I guessed she had put up a fight.

As I stood there looking down, her eyelids fluttered and she opened her eyes and said 'Pinky?' Pinky was her nickname for me. It is short for Pinkerton.

I crouched down beside her. 'I'm here, Ma.'

She said, 'Is Emmet alive?'

I looked over at pa. He was not breathing. His eyes

were closed & he had a peaceful smile on his face. He also had a hatchet buried in his chest. I swallowed hard.

'No, Ma,' I said.

'He was a good man,' she said. 'I will see him walking the Streets of Glory before too long.'

'Don't talk that way, Ma. I will fetch Doc Finley from Dayton.'

'No.' Her voice was faint. 'There is no time. I'm dying. Your medicine bag. The one your other ma gave you.'

'I do not think my medicine bag can help you now, Ma.'

'No. I mean…that's what they were after.' She gave a kind of sigh and I thought she had gone. But then her eyes opened & she gripped my hand tight. 'It holds your Destiny. Pinky, do you remember my special hiding place?'

'Loose floorboard behind the stove?'

She nodded. 'You're smart, Pinky. You'll figure out what to do. Take that medicine bag and get out fast. Before they come back.'

I did not understand what she meant at first. Then I did. 'The Indians who did this might come back?' I said.

'They weren't Indians.' Her voice was real faint now & her skin was a terrible white. She said, 'One of them had blue eyes. And he smelled like Bay Rum Hair Tonic. Indians do not wear Hair Tonic.'

I sniffed the air. Ma Evangeline was right. Above the smell of blood, scalded milk & fresh-baked cake, I could detect the sweet scent of cloves: Bay Rum Hair Tonic. I

also picked up a tang of sweaty armpits.

The men who did this had left a few minutes ago & could return any moment. My instinct was to run, but I did not want to leave my dying ma.

'Go, Pinky,' she said. 'Take your medicine bag and get out of here before they come back.'

I stood up & looked down at her. She would be dead in a minute. I clenched my fists.

'I will find those men,' I said. 'And I will avenge you, Ma.'

'No,' she said. And then she said, 'Pinky?'

I could barely hear her so I squatted down beside her again. 'Yes, Ma?'

'Promise me you that you will never take another life. Not even those who killed me. You must forgive. That is what our Lord teaches.'

'I can't promise that, Ma,' I said. My vision was blurry. I blinked & it got clearer.

'It is my dying wish,' she said. 'You have to.'

'Then I promise,' I said.

She closed her eyes & whispered, 'And promise you will not gamble nor drink hard liquor.'

'I promise.'

But this time she did not hear me.

I stood & looked down at the bodies of my foster ma & pa. They lay next to each other and the pool of mingled blood was still spreading.

I went over to the stove, carefully picking my way around the things that had been thrown down. A tin

canister of flour had been emptied onto the floor. I made sure I stepped around it. Flour would make me leave footprints as sure as blood.

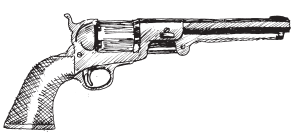
I took the burning milk off the hotplate. Then I knelt down beside the stove & felt for the floorboard with the little knothole. I got my fingertip in there & pulled it up. I found my medicine bag & took it out. I hung it around my neck. I also found a gold coin worth $20 that ma kept for emergencies. She would not need it now, so I took that, too. I put it in my medicine bag with the other things. Then I put the board back in its place.

Outside I heard men speaking in hushed tones. One of the porch stairs creaked.

I knew it was them. The killers were coming back.

I looked around the house. There were not a lot of places in that one-roomed cabin that I could hide.

It seemed to me there was only one.



LEDGER SHEET 3

Over against the far wall of the cabin stood Ma Evangeline's tall pine dresser. Its shelves were about half full of books and half full of plates.

I scrambled up that dresser as fast as a squirrel with its tail on fire. When I got near the top I half turned and leapt onto one of the two big rafters of the house. I am small for my age, but I am agile.

I was up on the rafter before the door handle even began to turn, but in my haste I had set some of the china trembling. As the front door eased open I noticed a big blue & white plate rolling along the top of the dresser.

It slowed, hesitated, and then stopped right at the edge.

I breathed a sigh of relief, then froze as I heard a man's whiny voice say, 'Is it safe?'

'Yeah it's safe,' said a deeper voice. 'They's still dead. Come on you big scaredy-cat.'