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Virginia City  
Idaho Territory  
January 30, 1864

Kincaid just left me. He carried a message from the Citizens Vigilance Committee demanding an interview with me tonight. Kincaid also made it clear I should get my affairs in order.

The blowing snow batters the window as I look onto the main street of Virginia City. So much blood has been spilled into the frozen mud out there that I can scarcely remember the faces of those who died. There was Ives and Zachery. Then Colgan. Then Mayfield and his uncle. There was Yeager and Brown, Bunton and Dutch John. The horrible night when they hanged Helm, the sickly Frank Parish, and the rest from a beam in the unfinished building; then there was the drunk Joe Slade and poor Joe Pizanthia, whose only crime was being foreign. I heard they shot him a hundred times before they burned his body to ashes.

As I said, so many faces and so many names to go with the faces.

It is cold this late afternoon, perhaps a little below zero. Winter's icy grip won't begin to let go for many more months. Spring was when I planned to leave the territory and never come back. It would seem the committee has other plans for me, however.

I have opened a bottle of whiskey. The liquor burns in my gullet on the way down but, thankfully, it calms me. I am not a drinking man as was Exeter Colgan, my predecessor here at the newspaper. Well, maybe I drink more than I should these days but only because the thought of facing the committee freezes me inside, as I'm sure it did for all those before me, guilty or innocent.

I look out my window through the watery light as the sun sinks behind the distant Beaverhead Mountains producing an arc of vivid golden red rays. The wind has picked up as it often does here in the late afternoon, blowing the snow into drifts against my door. My thoughts turn to my Connecticut home, in a farm hamlet called Coventry.

I think of my father, Ezekiel Coffey, the local schoolmaster, his harsh and lean Puritan countenance glaring out across a classroom full of terrified boys, his hickory switch never far from hand, dealing out his own form of justice to those he considered slow or backsliding. I wonder what Father might think of the justice about to be meted out to me by the committee. He would certainly appreciate its historical significance. His son would be the second man from Coventry hanged by the neck (the first being the patriot hero of the revolution, Nathan Hale). Curious I remember that. I probably have Father's switch to thank.

I glance at the current edition published just two days ago. Actually, calling the *Virginia City Tribune* a newspaper is an exaggeration. It is merely a two-sided sheet of cheap newsprint. Of course the war is on everyone's mind so I dutifully transcribe accounts from the newspapers Nathan Carter sends me in order to tell my readers about the great conflict that engulfs the nation. My eye falls on this item:

*A Great Battle at Chattanooga*

—

*A Union Triumph*

—

*If True, Enemy is Swept From  
Missionary Ridge by Federal Forces*

—

*More Than 5,000  
Rebels Are Dead or Wounded*

—

*Gen. Grant Commanded*

—

*Many Prisoners Are Taken*

—

*Federal Casualties Light*

I know there is a lie in that headline somewhere but without a reliable correspondent on or near the front, I have no idea where the falsehood might be. “Federal Casualties Light” sounds suspicious.

No matter, as I have quite painfully learned in recent days, fact and fiction in Virginia City are matters of perspective. Also reported are the more mundane community events in this edition. There’s the death of old Clem Murray (frostbite—a common enough problem here—corrupted his feet and gangrene set in). A new fire company has formed in Bannack. There is an account of a Hungarian miner’s “slooshing” a goodly amount of color at the western end of Alder Gulch despite the thick ice. And here’s something from our esteemed head of public education, Professor Thomas J. Dimsdale, late of Oxford, on the opening of a singing school at the Masonic Hall.

I turn the broadsheet over and again regard the item that has earned me my interview. I knew this was ill advised when I set it in type. I sip my whiskey and the north wind howls out of the high passes. No fiction in that headline. I know because I was there. Outside my window, a horseman dismounts. He is a small, rotund man draped in a heavy black coat, his hat pulled low. He wears shiny black boots and gauntlet gloves against the cold. I cannot see his face but I know it is X. Beidler.

He glances at me through the window, and I cannot make out his expression because his face is nearly covered with a black scarf. But I do see his eyes, and they are a remarkable liquid black, cold and penetrating. He ties his big bay gelding to a post, looks at me again, then huddles into his coat and strides off toward the Masonic Hall at the top of Wallace Street. What an appropriate name, I think to myself. X. He will be one of my judges and, contrary to common law, one of my jurors. Quite possibly, he will also be my executioner, seeing as how he enjoys that role so very much.

I must return to my work. I have the next edition to prepare. I stand and walk across the room’s dusty wooden floor, past the small rotary printing press and the piles of old newsprint to a small side table where I’ve collected copies of newspapers from Salt Lake, San Francisco and finally St. Louis. The *St. Louis Informer* is many weeks old, having made its way west to me via Salt Lake City. It contains perhaps the most current glimpse of the outside world as we are likely to see this side of the Rocky Mountains. We are isolated here in this lost and lawless corner of Idaho Territory, as the reader may have deduced, in a land not greatly changed since Lewis and Clark’s famed Corps of Discovery blazed through it some sixty years ago.

I see General Ulysses Grant is pressing the rebels in northern Georgia and Knoxville is under siege. Brownsville in Texas has been captured. The Federal Navy continues its blockade of Savannah and New Orleans. More talk of British intrigue in the war. Technically, we’re in the Union if you listen to the civic leaders here, but many of my readers support the Confederate States of America since they

come from places like Arkansas, the Carolinas, and Alabama. Very few are without a strong opinion one way or the other, so tension forms fertile ground within which violence takes root, sprouting bitter fruit far too frequently in the form of knife fights, gunfights, and fist fights.

But there is something more than simmering political hatred here—something far more toxic. There is greed. The miners toiling in Alder Gulch are greedy. The merchants who supply the miners are greedy. The petty criminals who followed the miners and merchants into the valley are greedy. The assayers are greedy. The cardsharps are greedy. The painted whores that service the miners, merchants, and mendicants are greedy. And the committee is greedy. How else to explain Biedler's fine gelding outside my window, once owned by Captain Slade? Or the cabin in Nevada City that used to belong to Jack Gallagher, which Sanders now rents to a dry goods merchant?

Gold. Greed. Gore. Could there possibly be one without the others? Could there be a more fitting motto than those three words for Virginia City? I put the whiskey to my lips and drain the glass. The image of the Mormon's panicky blue eyes comes to me again. They are wide with shock and disbelief that he was dying so young.

Back to work. I begin to set type for the next edition. I do not know when or if it will be published so I wait to set the date on the masthead. I busy myself setting the St. Louis account of a speech given by President Lincoln at Gettysburg. For a politician, it seems very brief. My skill at typesetting was a bonus for Colgan. He was not adept at setting the lead type; all thumbs. But I had acquainted myself with the trade in the city of New York while employed as a correspondent at the *New York World*.

I enjoyed setting type. It was exacting and methodical, much like the law I saw practiced in the city's courts, where I served as the newspaper's correspondent after my graduation from Yale. My father was most unhappy with my decision to become a "scribbler," as he called newspapermen. He wished for me to follow him into teaching and had tried to gain for me a situation at Amherst College where one of his Yale classmates was the chancellor.

But I enjoyed writing accounts of the news, especially the proceedings in the courts, where I could see the many faces of justice. There a man could be legally tried by a jury made up of his peers before a judge elected by the people under the constitutions and criminal codes of the state of New York and the United States of America. A condemned man might disagree with the verdict, but he would be hard pressed to argue he had been denied due process. I wish I could say the same for the manner in which justice is exercised these days in Alder Gulch.

I am absorbed in my typesetting when a fierce rap on the window startles me. It is Nellis Kincaid again, his dirty face squashed against the glass. What an ugly man. He jabs his finger in the direction of the Masonic Hall up the street. I draw my watch and see it is almost seven o'clock. It is dark and the wind has subsided a little. Long icicles hang like fangs from the eave over the boardwalk outside my door. Adog barks. I hear bellowing laughter explode from the saloon across the way. A carriage slowly rolls by outside, the driver and passengers looking like great cloth sacks. Time to meet the committee.

I wipe my hands on a rag and then slowly don my coat. I walk back to my desk and open a drawer where I find what I now need. It is a very old copy of the Constitution of the United States. I found it in Colgan's desk after he was murdered. It is printed on parchment and I wonder if it wasn't indeed an original copy of the laws on which the republic was founded. The brittle paper crumples a bit as I finger the document searching for a passage. I find what I seek and, after carefully folding the document, I slide it into my jacket pocket, turn the lamp down, place my hat on my head, and make my way out the door of the *Virginia City Tribune* office, perhaps for the last time.