Chapter Fourteen

When Things Get Tough

1883 – 1897

Nellie had newspapers from San Diego and San Francisco spread over the counter at the restaurant. She read articles that reported riches in gold were being taken from an area in Baja California between Calmalli and Mission Santa Gertrudis. Fannie’s illness continued, and that dogged the back of Nellie’s mind whatever she was doing. Maybe a trip there might prove profitable, and take her mind off her sister.

The thought had barely drifted through her head when Milt Joyce and Mark Smith walked into the American Hotel. Both wore determined looks. Milt operated the Oriental Saloon and owned part of the Magnolia Ranch up in Horseshoe Canyon. Mark, an attorney, had become well known throughout the territory. “Afternoon, Miss Nellie.”

Nellie gestured to chairs and encouraged them to take seats. “And a good afternoon to the two of you.” She sat glasses of water in front of both men.

Milt flipped his chair around, draped his large frame over it backward, picked up a knife from the setting on the table and twirled it between his fingers.
“Miss Nellie, we all recognize your expertise at mining both silver and gold, that we do.” He winked at her.

Irishmen. He danced with her so often at the balls that he wore her stockings out. Milt had mining interests too, and Nellie didn’t know how to respond, so she waited for the other shoe to drop.

“We’re thinking of taking a party into Mexico to the gold strike there. If you’d lead us, give us the benefit of your expertise, I’d bankroll the project,”

Nellie wondered whether Milt only wanted to go to Mexico to throw the focus of the town off his failed Tombstone Ranger attempt to corral marauding Apaches. She also pondered how committed Mark was to the idea, until he smiled a half smile before he spoke. “I can also throw in some funds.”

What did their reasons matter, after all. She wanted to go. This was providential. She leaned her chair onto its back legs, but made sure the toes of her shoes still touched the floor for balance. “How many men do you think want to go?”

Milt probed the hair on his top lip with his finger. “And I don’t have an exact count, but looks to be over 20.”

For a while Nellie stared up at the ceiling. “I’ve considered the strike down in Baja myself. Here’s what I think will work. We provision here in Tombstone. Then we travel to Contention and board the train to the port of Guaymas. According to the papers, at Guaymas we can buy donkeys and take a boat to a little village called Mulege. We’ll use the burros to cross the desert.” She dropped the chair down to sit on all four legs and dropped a finger on the table for
each piece of the task. “We will arrange our men like the soldiers at Fort
Huachuca, where everyone has a task – carrying water, organizing maps and
papers, keeping tools in working order, and so on.”

Milt and Mark stood. “It’s a deal then.”

When the men left, Nellie checked Sam’s supply list. While she prepared
the orders for Los Angeles, she considered what would have to be done to prepare
for this trip. She wanted this adventure, after the long months of caring for
Fannie. She enlisted waitresses and married women in Tombstone to help with
William when she had to be away and kept T.J. and Mike busy when they weren’t
in school. They helped wash dishes and mopped floors as well as chopped
vegetables Sam Lee needed prepared. They would need to stay where Willie
stayed while she was away.

Twenty-one of the leading citizens of Tombstone followed Nellie into the
Mexican desert on May 20 in search of gold. Everything went as Nellie planned
until they left Mulege. She decided that only six, who would test the gold field,
should go first across the sun-blanced desert. The rest would remain in Mulege.

She realized before the first hour was out that though they knew the
Arizona desert, they didn’t know this waterless desert, where not even a lizard
could survive, and traveling ten miles was like traveling 50 in Arizona. At first
sweat poured from her, and then it didn’t, and she dared not drink more from her
canteen until they reached a water hole. They faced dehydration if they didn’t find
that water.
Nellie forced herself to put one foot in front of the other. The sand burned her feet even through the soles of her shoes. She and the rest of the party had rationed the water, but it was gone. She had to keep them moving under the blazing sun, or they would all die. *Jesus, you stood off the devil for forty days in the burning desert. Please sustain us here.* Her eyes on the rocky sand at her feet, she added, *What do you have for me to learn?* She roused herself and tried to encourage the rest. “There’s a water hole up ahead. We’ll get there soon, of a certain.”

Milt dropped into the sand. “I want to, but I just cannot do it.”

Mark grabbed Nellie’s arm and murmured through cracked lips. “We can’t leave him.”

Nellie dropped onto a blistering rock near Milt. “Let’s rest then, but cover your skin with whatever you have.” They slept.

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A Mexican who wore a huge sombrero that blocked some of the sun shook her. “Senorita! Agua, aqui, agua!”

Nellie roused and saw the offered canteen. She gulped the lukewarm water. Then she looked toward the others. She pointed to the men and indicated the Mexican should give them water.

Each of them drank and drank.

The Mexican gestured so that they understood he would go on, but would send help. Night was coming on, so they ate and prepared to sleep again. Nellie knew she had almost been responsible for the death of some of the best people in
Tombstone. She wanted to weep like the woman she was, but she was also still the leader, and she couldn’t allow herself a good cry. She decided to encourage them instead. “We shouldn’t travel, so they’ll find us where he tells them we’ll be. Wrap up against the cold.” It seemed ironic that the desert fell so cold at night.

In the morning, they didn’t eat. With no water, food wouldn’t go down anyway. They didn’t talk, even spit seemed precious. The sun rose higher in the sky. Nellie prayed that the Mexican would keep his word. The sun descended the western sky, and she had almost given up, when they heard a shout.

“Hello! Are you the Joyce, Cashman party?”

Milt was so weak, he could only whisper. “We’re saved!”

They waved their arms and waited. A Mexican with a man from their party came into view with a burro that carried two water barrels. Everyone drank their fill.

The rescuer from their party then sat on his haunches. “That Mexican who told us you were in trouble said that he bought the gold he had, and that the claims about the strike are overrated.”

Mark Smith yelled. “Then let’s get our tails out of this desert!” To a person, everyone agreed. They headed back to Mulege.

By June 11 Nellie and the boys had arrived goldless in Tombstone. Michael met Aunt Nell when the stage came in. He looked at her face and arms and then spoke. “Your skin is really brown.”
With all they’d been through, Nellie roared with laughter. When she could get control, she said, “My hide is happy to be brown instead of dead, Michael.” Wait till he heard the rest of the story.

At the end of June, Nellie reopened the Russ House. She placed blue lace curtains at the windows to give the place an air of coolness. Gas lamps made of brass hung from the ceiling. To her amazement, the disaster in Mexico hadn’t changed people’s opinions of her. They still saw her as a spiritual woman of wisdom and kindness. It brought tears to her eyes when *The San Diego Union* of June 16, 1883 responded to the Mexico fiasco with this:

> In all the vicissitudes of life she has maintained the highest self respect, but is as ambitious in her notions as Joan of Arc. In Arizona she could raise a company at any time who would follow her to death, either in search of gold or Apaches.

She wondered whether any of them realized that what they saw in her came from God.

Not long after the Mexico trip, Fannie, in far worse shape than she’d been when she left for San Diego, came to Tombstone one last time. Her girls watched over her like mother cats. She and Nellie went to Fannie’s old room to discuss what would happen once she had passed on.

“I want them to become upright citizens, Nellie. I liked the convent in San Diego. The Sisters are fine, loving women. Perhaps you could continue to keep the boys with you, and send the girls back to San Diego?” Fannie knew Nellie paid for everything in San Diego, and she knew as well that Nellie didn’t mind at all.
Nellie looked down at her hands. “And are you sure? I don’t want them to feel like I have abandoned them.”

Fannie tipped Nellie’s chin up. “I’ve already told them, and they are in agreement.”

“Then I’ll do as you say, Fannie. You are a wonderful mother.” Nellie doing as Fannie instructed would be a first, but Nellie owed her that. She had followed Nellie’s instructions over and over.

Fannie’s eyes closed. “And so will you be, Nellie.”

As soon as her business was arranged, Fannie pushed on to see Mum in San Francisco. Tears stood in Michael and T.J.’s eyes as they helped their mother board the train. She glanced back at Nellie. “I’ll love you forever.”

“And I you, Fannie. And I you.

Only a month later, another of the dreaded telegrams came. It said Fannie had died in San Francisco on July 3. In order to help Mum with her sister’s funeral, Nellie closed the Russ House and took the children with her. Fannie was buried alongside Thomas in Calvary Cemetery.

Now only Mum and Nellie were left. Kate O’Hara had moved in as Mum’s boarder and Cousin Michael checked on her every other day. Still, she was getting on. Perhaps she needed Nellie now. Nellie didn’t ask her, though. She had to mother the children.

When Nellie and the Cunningham children returned to Tombstone, she reopened the Russ House on Fifth and Toughnut streets, and renamed it the Nellie Cashman Restaurant.
She supplied the money and sent young Frances, a violinist, to St. Paul, Minnesota to an excellent convent to study music. Mamie went back to the Sisters in San Diego.

When they finished work in the restaurant, Michael, T.J., William and their friends often played baseball in a vacant lot nearby. During a busy lunch hour, Nellie heard the boys yell and scuffle outside. She rushed out of the restaurant and into the lot. T.J. had Mike by the shirt collar and was about to punch him in the face.

She pulled T.J. off Mike. “Stop it this instant!”

T.J. glared at Mike and yelled. “He called me a girl!”

Mike made a face at T.J. “You are a girl. You can’t even hit the ball. We should have sent you to the convent and let Frances stay here. At least she can hit one now and then.”

Nellie clapped her hands together. “And if you don’t stop, and I mean right this very minute, I will send you all to your room for the rest of the weekend!”

The boys looked down at their shoes, their faces still stony with anger.
“All right, then, face each other.” She moved them an arm’s length apart, where they faced each other. “Now, I want you to say, ‘Brother, I love you dearly, and I want the best for you.’ “

T.J. glanced at Mike as Mike glanced at T.J. But neither said anything.

Nellie scowled and pointed her finger at them. “I mean it. Let’s hear you.”

T.J. stabbed his finger into Michael’s chest. “You first!”

Nellie grabbed each of them by the ear. “Together!”

At the same time, both boys said “Brother!” then gave up to laughter.

Nellie laughed right along with them. She rounded up all the boys. “I think a little sweet is in order, then. Come in and we’ll have some pie.” What would she do with these boys who interrupted meals like this?

A piece of pie became the solution to many arguments, but it didn’t take long for Nellie to realize the boys staged squabbles, just to get the pie. , about this time a friend of hers built a race track north of town. Nellie went to him and arranged to add a baseball park in the center of it. After that, the boys took their baseball shenanigans to the park. It worried her that they weren’t right under her eye, but they were older and needed to have more responsibility anyway.

As the Arizona sun slid behind the horizon one afternoon, Nellie served fried chicken to William Brophy, a newcomer to Benson. An old prospector rushed into the restaurant. “Miss Nellie, I just saw Michael and another boy on burros head north out of town toward the Dragoons.”

“Oh, and what that boy won’t think of next!” Nellie whipped off her apron, grabbed a buggy whip, and rushed from the restaurant. She drove her
buckboard at breakneck speed through the gathering night toward Sulphur Springs.

Nellie could see the fires of Apaches between herself and the Dragoons. She knew of an abandoned ranch house out that way and took the chance that the boys might have headed there. As her horses galloped up to the edge of a dry wash, she could see the house, and sure enough the boys had tied the burros to mesquite beside it.

Nellie reined the horses to a stop outside the tumble down house and jumped from the buckboard. She ran into the darkness inside the shack, grabbed both boys by the ears without a word and marched them to the buckboard. There, she ordered them in a whisper to get up and hold on. She threw herself back on the driver’s seat and raced for Tombstone.

When they hit Fremont Street, she turned to yell at them. “And only our good Lord knows what in the world’s gotten into you two. Apaches would just love to have your hair, or better yet turn you into braves.” The buckboard swerved, and she looked back to guide the horses back into the middle of the street. Then she turned on them again. “You can be sure that you’ll be after making no escapades, have no fun entirely, for a good long while. The two of you will wash walls, dishes, tables and anything else I can find. Begorah, you need something to keep you busy!”

Michael pointed, to show her they were heading off the street again. She pulled the reins to her left without looking away from the boys. “If I say jump, you will ask ‘how high?’ on the way up. Are you understanding what I’m saying here!” The more she talked, the angrier she got, and by the time they rolled down Fifth Street, all of
Tombstone could hear her, despite the noise from the saloons. Both boys crouched on
the bed of the buckboard. They looked like they would love to disappear.

Her anger subsided when she saw their faces. She wondered if Michael
behaved without thought because he missed Fannie. She climbed down from the
buckboard and walked them into the restaurant. Under her breath she sang

“Cockles and Mussels” to herself so she could calm down. Her mind wandered
back over the years, thinking of the fine times she and Fannie had had together.

In Dublin's fair city, where the girls are so pretty
I first set my eyes on sweet Molly Malone
As she wheeled her wheel-barrow
Through streets broad and narrow
Crying cockles and mussels, alive, alive-O!
Alive, alive-O! alive, alive-O!
Crying cockles and mussels, alive, alive-O!
She was a fish-monger, but sure 'twas no wonder
For so were her father and mother before
And they each wheeled their barrow
Through streets broad and narrow
Crying cockles and mussels, alive, alive-O!
Alive, alive-O! alive, alive-O!
Crying cockles and mussels, alive, alive-O!

She died of a fever, and no one could save her
And that was the end of sweet Molly Malone
But her ghost wheels her barrow
Through streets broad and narrow
Crying cockles and mussels, alive, alive-O!
Alive, alive-O! alive, alive-O!
Crying cockles and mussels, alive, alive-O!

Nellie put her hand in her apron pocket, pulled out a coin and flipped it. She’d
have to send someone out to get the donkeys tomorrow. Mike loved that donkey.

Tombstone’s mines were playing out. What with the rising ground water, the
pumps breaking down, and miners striking, she wouldn’t be able to make a living here
much longer. She felt certain Mike and T.J. would want to go with her when she left, but
Willie was too small. Perhaps he could go to the Catholic school in Santa Fe, New Mexico. At the restaurant, she scouted the newspapers for new strikes that might help her support the children.

Mr. Brophy, who came to enjoy their food often, talked with Nellie about the prospects for mining, and about Fannie’s children. “Nellie, from what I can tell, you’ve always been self-sufficient, helped others, found your own path. These children could relieve you of that burden. They need you, and truth be told you need them. Everybody needs somebody. Don’t you enjoy their devotion, their hugs and sweetness? Why don’t you stay in Tombstone and make a home for them. Run the restaurant.”

Nellie looked at the floor. “I do enjoy them, but I’m used to being without hugs and sweetness, I don’t have to have it. I can look out for them and still mine. You know the Toughnut stope is headed under my restaurant. how long will it be before my place drops into the mine? I’ll send money for Willie’s support and a decent education. I’ll take Mike and T.J. mining with me. When they need higher education, I’ll send them off. I need the frontier, the adventure, Mr. Brophy.”

Toughnut stope, courtesy of Tombstone Courthouse
“You must do what you must do, then. Are you sure?”

Nellie met Mr. Brophy’s eyes, where she saw pity. “And I’m sure.” She made sure to say goodbye to each of the boys she saw on the street while she prepared to leave.

She packed up Michael and T.J., and over the next thirteen years they roamed the West. Sometimes, she asked God to direct her, and sometimes she forgot, but she didn’t find satisfaction anywhere. In Nogales she tried to help T.J., who was 14, to open a hotel. He was too young. When Mamie visited them in Yuma, she met a prison guard from the territorial prison and married him. At one point, Michael worked in a soap factory, but only until the mines there began to close.

Papers published little articles about Nellie and she ran ads for her businesses from Nogales, Tucson, Harqua Hala, Phoenix, Prescott, Jerome, Globe and Yuma, Arizona Territory; Juneau, Alaska; Bodie, California; Cripple Creek, Colorado; C’oeur d’Alene, Idaho; Minas Prietas, Sonora; Montana, Oregon, Washington and Wyoming. Once she even wrote a mining report for a newspaper. She went on helping the boys wherever they landed, but no place felt right.

Mike left her in Montana. He wrote “…because I just couldn’t keep up with you. We were always on the move, looking for gold and silver.” He had gotten tired of her roving lifestyle and returned to Tombstone. Nellie had sent a letter with him. Mr. Brophy
had come up in the world. He owned a bank in Bisbee. In the letter, Nellie asked him to set Michael up as a clerk in Brophy’s bank, which he did.

More and more people poured into the West, but Nellie longed for the wildness of the old frontier. She had looked, and could not find it anymore. Mike and Mamie were settled. T.J. would still follow her. She had to mine. The children didn’t need her. She’d settled four of them well so that they could grow to people of character. She’d visit now and then, but she didn’t need them, either. They needed to find their own paths in life.

Finally, she heard of a gold strike in Alaska. She didn’t know which of the miners she discussed it with in 1897 had told a reporter, but a piece from the Arizona Daily Star of Tucson told what she planned to do about the Alaska strike. It read:

Miss Nellie Cashman, one of the most favorably known women in Arizona arrived from Yuma yesterday. Miss Nellie is preparing to organize a company for gold mining in Alaska, where she has visited three times. Her many friends in Arizona will wish her success, for during her twenty years residence in the Territory, she has made several fortunes, all of which have gone for charity.

Gold had been discovered in the last frontier, the Klondike of the Yukon Territory, the land of the midnight sun, and Nellie headed north.