

Chapter Four
California or Bust!
1865-1866

Nellie ran home through the streets of Boston at dusk. A rock in her shoe stopped her, and she realized she stood in front of Immaculate Conception Church. She entered, lit a candle, then knelt on the marble floor among the white columns before the Virgin Mary. “Blessed Mother, I think our Father stopped me here. You know I talk to Sister Anna Clarence, and now I’m after talking to Jesus. I want my every step to be guided from above. I wish at my life’s end to have always been your Son, our Father and the Holy Spirit’s humble child, then. Jesus, I want to sail to California to seek my fortune. Sister Anna Clarence said you know me, and I should give you my life. She said I only need to ask. So I am asking. If You will take my life and guide me, even though I am such a willful girl, I will not keep whatever I might find in my adventures for myself. Sure and I would use whatever you give me to help people who need it. Will You take my life, and am I supposed to go to California?”

Nellie waited in the incense laden air of the church on her knees.

She sensed a warm eternal nod from somewhere that only her spirit knew. “Yes, go Nellie.” She jumped to her feet. “I Thank you, Blessed Mother. I Thank You, Jesus, please guide me. And I promise, though I want to make enough money not to have to depend on anyone who can take what’s mine, I’ll never be an Englisher.” She had spoken too loudly in a church. Heads turned, but she didn’t notice.

The West! Nellie flew home over footpaths’ smooth cobbled stones. She ignored the odor of raw onions that assaulted her as she rushed into their little brownstone, shed the navy blue jacket Mum had cut down for her to wear in her lift operator job, and shouted. “Mum, I have such news!” Clearly, she’d find Mum in the kitchen, and headed that way.

“And what is it, m’ girl?” Mum leaned against the kitchen sink where she chopped onions for dinner. “Now, we’re having lamb stew for dinner, and I’m tasting carrots, garlic, green beans and even potatoes. Next thing you know, we’ll be after buying our own sheep.” She licked her lips, and Nellie could imagine her drooling. They laughed at the joy of having not only enough food, but delicious food. Mum stopped cutting and glanced at Nellie. “So, and what is your news?”

Nellie admired Mum’s delight at the small pleasure of plenty of vegetables for lamb stew. Perhaps that’s why she took pleasure in small things herself, because she’d watched Mum do that, and all, well except during the famine. But, to the business at hand. “Take a seat, Mum. I’ve been given a grand idea, then.”

Mum tucked her pink gingham skirts around her legs and took a place at the end of the bench near the table.

Nellie slid her leg over the bench to sit next to Mum. She plucked a cherry from a bowl on the red and white checked oilcloth and leveled her eyes on her mother. "And I'm talking to a man in the lift about my future. He says to me, 'Young woman, go west, they need folks like you out there.' Can you imagine it, Mum? California! Michael's already in San Francisco or somewhere close. Why, who knows what we might do there. I'd be after fitting right in, because they need adventurers who don't mind hard work, whether women or men. We'd be regular Argonauts, like those 49ers! Women who enjoy making their homes are needed, but so would I be!" Nellie hesitated. She watched for Mum's reaction in her mother's eyes. Mum's blessing needed to follow God's, even if Nellie was 21 and could go alone. Mum and Fannie were her family. Without them she would be alone. She was not keen on going alone. Besides, they couldn't survive without her wages.

While she watched Mum drum her fingers on the table, Nellie tasted the tart cherry. Mum's eyes roamed about the kitchen and sometimes out the window. She probably remembered all too well the coffin ship from Ireland and wondered if the smells were as sickening now as then.

At last, Mum looked at her. "Nellie, we have lived in Boston a long time. We have earned our own home. I let you kick against the goads when you were a child, demanding to have a role women do not take on. Now, if I consent to do this, I may be agreeing to let you become a source of ridicule. You may face a solitary life of desperation. I will also be giving up our hard won home. To be honest, I am very unsure how to think about this. On the other hand, you are not a lass to act without thought. Adventurous and full of ideas, but sure and you have a solid head on your shoulders. I

don't know that anyone else is as well prepared to determine the route of your life than you. What do you know about the journey to California, then? And have you prayed about this?"

Nellie got up and paced the kitchen. "The night they threw us from the cottage is still fresh in my mind, as I am sure it is in yours. I never want to allow someone to throw me out of my home again. I understand how much this home means to you. It matters to me, too. However, I stopped at Immaculate Conception on the way home, and I gave my life to Jesus, Mum. I did pray about this idea. They say women don't have to follow the expectations of society in California. I'm after running down the street if I want to, wearing pants when I need to." She pantomimed a run and then put her foot on the bench, to pull at her pant leg. "No one will scowl at me, or whisper behind their hands." Now she scowled furiously and held her hand in front of her scowl pretending to whisper. Mum laughed so hard she held her stomach. "They say we can make our own way, follow our instincts. Couldn't we all go, you and me and Fannie? The lot of us, we'd be a handful to deal with, the three Irish musketeers, by heaven. I won't be alone if you are there, and we can ask Michael to see to a home before we come." Nellie straightened her spine, hands on her hips. Her eyes pled with her mother. "If I cost you money, sure and I will pay you back with what I make in California."

She had no idea of the details of the trek to California. The Boston Herald told of wagon trains, sailing ships and even the railroad that progressed across the country from east to west and west to east, but she had no details on what the trip would cost or how long it would take. However, it seemed to her they would all do better in a place where society didn't chain a woman to a kitchen and a cradle, a place where a woman could do

business and develop her dreams. It didn't seem to her that it would be difficult to arrange the details of how they were to travel to California. However, she could see she'd have to do it before Mum would commit to the trip.

Mum's eyes looked serious now. "Are you so sure then, that you can't be happy in Boston?"

"The South has lost the war, Mum. The soldiers will come home. I can only be a lift operator so much longer. Soon one of them will take my job. And even if they didn't, I don't want to do an inside job."

Mum rose and returned to chopping vegetables. "Keep talking. I am after listening."

"When the soldiers return, I'm back to servant or seamstress, or something else I don't want to do. Perhaps I could be someone's wife, but I think our Father has a plan in mind that suits me, perhaps not other women, but me. I don't know what it is yet, but I feel such restlessness to discover it."

Nellie paced back and forth across the kitchen again. After a bit, she knelt in front of Mum and took her hands. "Please, I'm after finding my future. When I prayed, Jesus and the Blessed Mother guided me on. I know it. Couldn't all three of us go?"

Mum sighed, and then winked at Nellie. "If you have Jesus' and Mary's blessing, then we shall travel once more. Only this once, mind you. However, sure and you'll need to find out how we're to reach California, and at least where we'll be the first week. I'll write to Michael." She hesitated while she dumped the vegetables into the cooking pot. "And of course we'll have to talk to Fannie. She'll be home soon." Mum wiped her

hands on the dish towel, turned and hugged her. “Nellie, you’ve got as much gumption as your mother!”

Nellie hugged Mum back and then danced a jig about the tiny kitchen.

When Fannie came home, Mum helped Nellie explain their idea. Fannie frowned down for several minutes at her hands in her lap. Nellie tried to still the tap of her foot as she waited for Fannie to make up her mind, but it just wouldn’t still. Fannie glanced over at Nellie’s foot every time it tapped the floor.

At last, Fannie looked back at Mum. “You know I’m not an adventurer like Nellie. I’m not even sure Nellie has made a good decision. Seems to me there could be a lot of pain in thumbing your nose at society. Kind of like a fish who strives to swim upstream. But I’m finished with high school, and though Boston shelters us, it does lack adventure.”

As if to herself, she murmured, “I don’t even know whether Thomas will come back from the war. I haven’t had a single answer to my letters. Only, I did plan to wait here.”

Nellie held her breath.

Fannie looked Nellie full in the face. “Let’s go. I suppose in case Thomas comes back, we could leave word where we’ve gone. Maybe he’ll follow us west.”

Nellie grabbed her sister’s shoulders and pulled her up from her chair. “Fannie, m’darlin’, you have made me the happiest woman in Boston. Let’s have a little dance.” Fannie was right. If Thomas were still alive, he would find her. They would all go. She felt lightheaded.

“Oh Nellie, for heaven’s sake.” Fannie laughed as they whirled around the

parlor. Nellie began to sing *An Irish Country Home*. Mum had sung this song to her since she was a wee lass, and as they whirled, they all sang.

In an Irish country home, One evening long ago
 Sat an old man and his little daughter Nell
 Said the girl with Irish glee, as she played upon his knee
 You promised me a story you would tell

"Come tell me of the past. Of my mother dear." she asked
 Come tell me how she used to look she cried
 Answering Nell the old man said, as he slowly bent his head
 Tears were in his eyes, he then replied

She was sweeter than the blossoms on the clover
 She was fairer than the evening sunset glow
 But I never will forget how much I loved her
 When your mother took my name long long ago
 We were married she and I, and in every way we tried
 To make our house a home of happiness
 'Til a bright Septembers morn, on the day that you were born
 God took her to a brighter home above

Chorus

In an Irish country home, one evening long ago
 Sat an old man and his little daughter Nell
 Though the best of friends must part
 She was dearer to my heart
 For your mother was the only one I love
 For your mother was the only one I love

Nellie got right to her homework about the trip, and then updated Mum and Fannie a few days later when they prepared dinner. "And we could travel much faster if we could ride the Transcontinental Railroad, but the railroad men don't plan to finish it for another four years. Their plan is to complete it in 1869 at a place called Promontory Point out in the middle of nowhere. I don't want to wait that long." Neither Mum nor Fannie commented.

Nellie pulled a loaf of bread from the oven, and went on. "If we go with one of the wagon trains that leave from St. Joseph or Independence, Missouri t'would take us six months *after* we managed to get to Missouri, as well as a great deal of hardship across the great hot, dusty deserts and steep, frigid mountain ranges." Fannie placed butter next to the bread, and went for the plates.

Mum placed the stew pot on a potholder on the table. "Your pluck brought us across the Atlantic, Mum, but you are older now. So I think we should book a cabin on a steamer to Panama, go across by train, and then take another ship to San Francisco. It will only take about a month and we can go second class to save money, but no more steerage for us!"

Mum and Fannie both nodded. Mum broke off a piece of bread. "It's a good plan, Nellie."

Nellie thought of the day she sat on a bench under the spreading green trees of Boston Common with Sister Anna Clarence. The grass had grown back in the time since the Army had moved out. "Sister, do you think Jesus loves a person like me? I am so opposite what they say a woman ought to be. I run instead of walk. I want to be outside instead of inside. I dislike sitting, needlework and the same old thing day after day. Instead, I love the conversation of men, and I want adventure. I want sunrises and sunsets. I want no day to be like any other."

Sister Anna Clarence's green eyes smiled. "Nellie, no one knows what Jesus thinks, except for the things He told us straight out. Things like love your neighbor, pray for people who hurt you, and so on. However, I do not think God would make you as you are, and then criticize you for it. I think instead that He would expect you to be the best

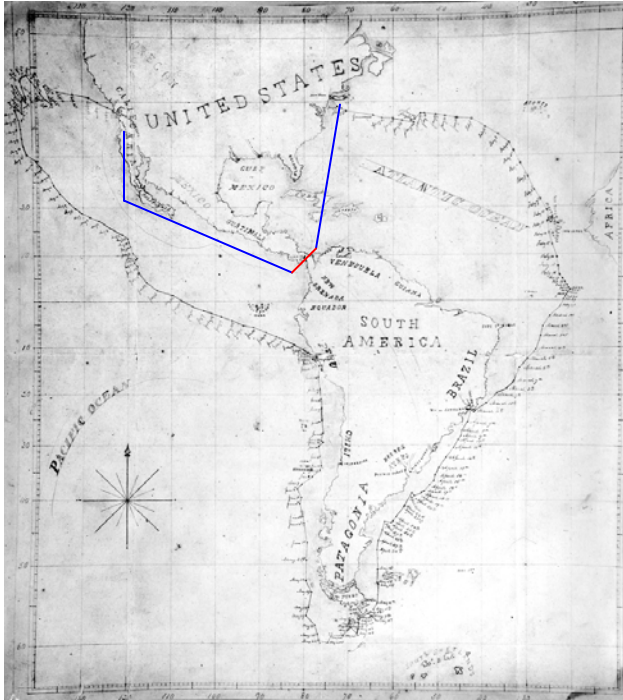
you it's possible for you to become. I believe each of us can only be that if we allow His guidance in everything we do. He needs to live in your heart."

"How do I do that, let Him live in my heart? I don't understand."

"You pray, just talk to Him. Tell Him you know He knows who you are, the good and the bad. Tell Him you need him to guide your adventuresome spirit the way He would have you go. Then you won't have to worry about the kind of woman you are. Once you have given your life to Him, He will direct you, and you can be confident in your steps."

She had prayed that prayer at Immaculate Conception, but now she realized she had made the plans for the trip to California without even talking to Him about it. *I forgot to ask You. Have I chosen the best way, Jesus? Tell me what to do.* A whisper in her head answered *In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight.* He must think her plan was good. In the future, she had to remember to ask first instead of checking in later.

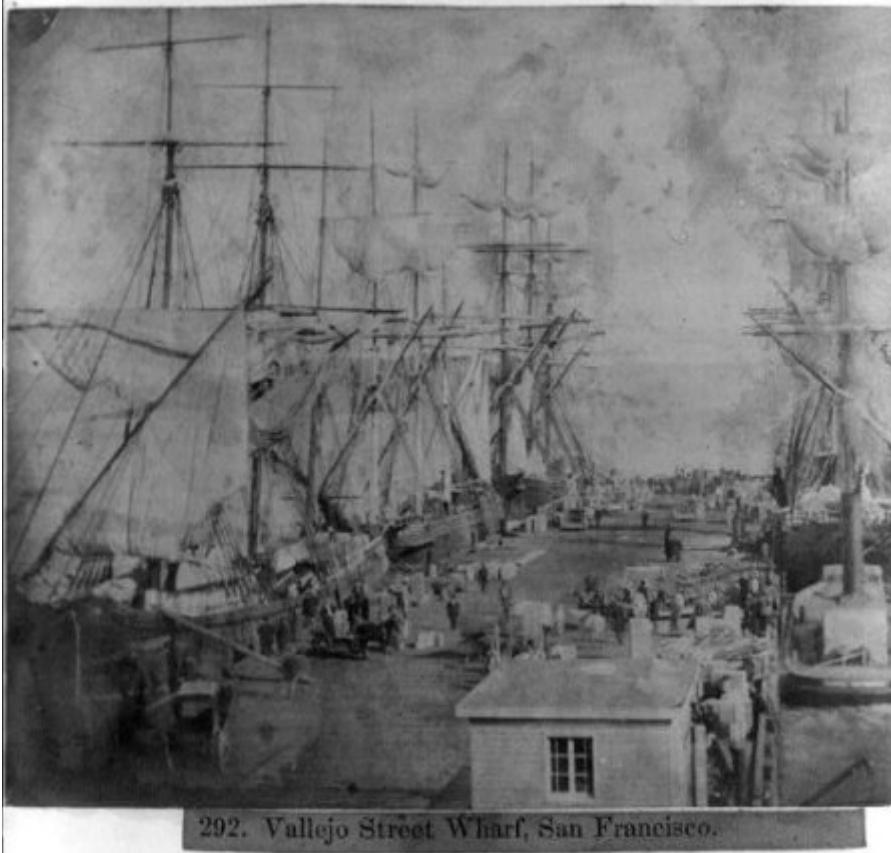
Not long after she presented her plan to Mum and Fannie, they sold the brownstone and used part of the money to pay for their trip.



Nellie's route through Panama is marked with blue for ships and red for rail. Many people went clear around Cape Horn on the other marked route, but it took far longer, and was dangerous.

http://www.nps.gov/safr/forteachers/upload/Sailor_intercept.pdf accessed 1/2/10

The three of them left Boston in early April and on steamer day, the 28th of April, 1866, they hurried down the gangplank into the hoards of people on a San Francisco wharf. When her feet hit the dock, Nellie threw her hands in the air. “We made it! One month – just like they said.” Nellie craned her neck from north to south. “I don’t see Michael anywhere, do you?”



<http://www.amazon.com/Photo-Reprint-San-Francisco-Calif/dp/B004JSI3V2>

From just behind them, they heard, “Boo! Would I be the lad you’d seek, you three best-looking women in San Francisco!”

“Michael!” they all hugged him at once.

“Sure and your home awaits, lasses. You’ll be staying with Thomas and Hannah Edstrom, grand people. And you’ve managed to miss last year’s earthquakes, so we’ll hope you’ve brought calm with you.”

He led them to a carriage. As they rode up the hill, Nellie wondered how it would be for her in the West. Would she fit in here, or would it be like that day on the Arizona, the ship they sailed from Panama on. Nellie had planted herself on a crate on deck to listen to the crew tell tales of California. Fannie had stayed with Mum in the cabin to read

a book, but couldn't resist her parting opinion. "You'll only invite trouble on deck with all those sailors. Why can't you ever act like a lady?"

Nellie knew she could manage men, so she ignored Fannie's comment. She enjoyed men because they saw the world so wider and more colorful than women saw things. She liked to listen to men's talk of travel and adventure better than women's of babies and shopping. She believed men made better friends than romantic interests, but could they see her as a friend? She'd seen some of their eyes roam over her, as if she were a ham they considered buying. As if to prove her thoughts, a sailor dropped from the rigging and doffed his cap.

"Lovely day, ma'am."

Nellie nodded acknowledgement. "T'is indeed."

The black-haired scalawag bowed and intoned, "Could I interest you in a little walk around the deck?"

Nellie frowned. "Not if you're after getting your work done, I'd think."

He slid his elbow inside hers, pulled her up and began to walk. "Nothing to worry about there, the first mate is at breakfast."

Nellie had pulled her arm out of his grasp. "But I am not. I have said no."

Now she wondered whether she could live in a way that men would be content to be her friends and women would accept her. She even wondered how she would support herself, Mum and Fannie. She wondered how God showed a person what He wanted them to do, especially when the person asked Him *before* she acted.