

Chapter Five

Silver in her Eyes

1867 – 1872

Nellie explored San Francisco from California Hill to the border of the wicked Barbary Coast. She began to feel at home because San Francisco's morning fog and floating afternoon clouds imitated those of Boston. She also enjoyed San Francisco because, like in Boston, the familiar brogue of a large Irish population tickled her ears in stores and public places.

She searched for a job in the three San Francisco newspapers, the *Daily Alta California*, the *Examiner* and the *Chronicle*. As she read, she noticed reports of the exploits of well-known people in the city like the Hearst family, as well as the goings on in California and the West.

One morning about a month after they arrived, Mum rushed into Nellie's bedroom with a letter. She tore open the envelope. "It's from Ellen and Dan!" She unfolded the sheets of paper and read. "My Dear Frances, It was good to get your letter and know that you have found Michael in San Francisco. Please give our love to the girls. The famine here has ended, and we have enough food to eat, every day. Some who lost their cottages are at work again and have a place to live." Mum gulped, and then continued. "I am sorry to tell you in a letter, but your mother passed before it was over. Her last request was to send you her love, and I do that with this letter. Love, Ellen" Mum struggled to finish the letter and tears ran. She dropped it on the floor. Nellie held her as their tears fell on each other. The world had another hole in it. First Papa, and now Grandmother. Her white lace curtain hair blew in Nellie's mind. Life had lost sweetness when she went to Heaven.

Time went by, and Nellie found a job as a waitress. Each day as she poured hot coffee into mugs she talked with people she met about their lives in the West. She worked in the restaurant for a couple of years, and somewhere in those days and months she began to feel at home in the "City by the Bay."

One day in the autumn of 1869 Nellie mused while she strolled home from the restaurant through the crisp leaves that had fallen from the sycamore trees. The *Daily Alta California* said men made themselves millionaires with the silver from the Comstock Lode in Nevada. Could that be a place for a woman to make money? If it was, how might she do it?

A shout from behind her startled her from her thoughts. "Nellie! Nellie Cashman, is that you? I'd know that forceful walk anywhere."

She knew that voice! She whirled only in time to be swept off her feet and tossed in the air. It was Thomas, not Edstrom, but their Thomas Cunningham, from Boston.

His strong arms caught her, thank heaven. "Thomas, and you're in San Francisco! I thought to never see you again, boyo."

Thomas set her back on her feet. "And where are Fannie and your mum?"

"At the Edstroms. Come with me, won't you? Fannie and Mum will be so glad to know you're here." They hurried through the streets together as the light faded. Their words flew as fast as their feet.

Nellie presented Thomas to Hannah Edstrom at the door with a flourish of her hand. "Hannah, this is Thomas Cunningham. We were friends in Boston."

Hannah offered Thomas her hand. "We were just preparing to sit down to dinner. And won't you have dinner with us, then? I'd like you to meet my husband, Thomas."

Thomas smiled and accepted. "A bachelor never turns down dinner when the delicious smell of fried chicken comes from the kitchen."

They could hear Mum squeal before she hurried from the back of the house. "Thomas! How in the world?"

Thomas took both her hands in his. "Frances, you don't look a day older than in Boston."

Mum blushed, and Nellie laughed. "Aw, and you're all the charmer, then, aren't you? And I think you missed Hannah's meaning. Sure and her husband is also named Thomas."

Thomas bumped his forehead with the flat of his hand. "Aw, well, and a finer name a man could never have. Perhaps I could be "Tom" during dinner to avoid confusion, then."

They had just hung their coats on the coat tree in the hall when Fannie rushed in and then came to an abrupt halt. "I heard you from upstairs, and I thought to never hear that voice again in me life."

"Sure and I looked for you in Boston, but could find neither hide nor hair."

Fannie socked Nellie's shoulder. "See, and I told you we should have waited for the war to end. He never got our message."

Nellie laughed. "I don't remember it just that way, but no matter. He's here now."

Once Thomas Edstrom had come from his work at the factory and the men had been introduced, they were all seated around the table. Mr. Edstrom said grace, and Fannie passed "Tom" mashed potatoes and gravy. "What are you doing in San Francisco, Thomas? I mean Tom."

"I make boots and shoes. What with the mining and all, the business grows day by day. My company is called the United Working Men's Boot and Shoe Manufacturing Company. It is a mouthful, but it is successful."

Nellie balled her hands into fists in front of her on the table. "Oh Tom, I'd so very much like to do that job."

Thomas' brows rose. "I could use your help, Nellie. There are other women who work in the factory, but we're still behind. Your day to get out of women's work may have come."

Nellie gave her hands a victory jerk. "It's settled then. I'll let them know at the restaurant and start work with you next week. Good enough?"

"Good enough. Except, Fannie, do you need a job?"

"Me, make boots?" Fannie put her napkin to her mouth.

Nellie put her arm around her sister's shoulder. "Give it a try, Fannie. And you might be after surprising yourself."

Fannie saw an opportunity she thought no one else saw, and she nodded.

Thomas Edstrom gave Hannah a look that Nellie took to mean he'd noticed Fannie's interest in Tom.

Mum cleared her throat, and changed the subject. "We've been looking for a place of our own, but everything in the safe districts of the city is so expensive. Thomas and Hannah have been kind, but we don't want to wear out our welcome, don't you know? Have you found rents to be high, Tom?"

Tom wiped his mouth. "And I've just bought my own home." He tilted his head to the side, gazed up at the ceiling for a moment, then resumed, "Would you three consider sharing my house? Sure and it's large, and I'm the only one there. Frances, I'd enjoy your cooking, for sure, and I'm sure you could find plenty to put your hand to."

Mum's cheeks turned pink. "I was not after fishing for you to take us in." He smiled. "I know you better than that."

Mum hesitated, but under the table, Nellie patted her knee to encourage her. Mum took a swallow of water. "Sure and that would be grand then, Tom."

Nellie, Fannie and Mum moved in with Thomas Cunningham at 336 Fifth Street a few weeks before Christmas. The home had two stories, and Nellie liked that it had lots of windows. It was a little fancier than she needed, but Fannie loved it.

She and Fannie started work at Thomas' boot company on a foggy Monday morning. She loved the smell of leather, but Fannie only tolerated the work because Thomas was there. A black-haired Englishman worked near them, who demanded to be called Sir Snowden. He bothered Nellie. First of all, he was an Englishman, but he also put his nose in their business when they talked. He dipped snuff, too. He spit the thick brown nastiness at a can he often missed. Behind their hands they called him Sir Snuff.

One day Fannie stayed home feeling under the weather. During a lull in the noise of the factory, Sir Snuff put down the boot he hammered and leveled a haughty look on Nellie. "It is my opinion that your sister is uncommonly interested in Mr. Cunningham." His left eyebrow went up in judgment.

"And that would be your business because?" She detested this man.

"You both live in his house, do you not? A convenient arrangement, I'd say."

"I beg your pardon, English hyena!"

"A real lady behaves with modesty, but you Irish ..."

The boot she'd sewn was in the air before Nellie thought. It landed on Sir Snuff's spit can and knocked it across the bench. Tobacco juice spewed over him, his bench, and the boot on his bench.

Workers around her yelled. "Give it to him, Nellie." "He's asking for it!"

Sir Snuff turned on them in time to be hit in the face by flying pieces of leather and an open bottle of dye.

Sure and she had started a war now.

"You Irish have no common decency!" His face cherry red, he stalked toward Thomas' office.

Nellie retrieved the boot she had thrown. Should she follow him or go back to work? She laid the boot on her bench. She had better go back to work. Her anger wouldn't help.

Sir Snuff marched back to his bench shortly. He spit a command. "Mr. Cunningham wants you in his office, right now!"

Nellie put her tools away in exact positions, just to take enough time to thumb her nose at Snuff's order. She gathered her skirts to avoid the tobacco juice on the floor. When she passed Snuff's bench, she held her back straight as an arrow. Workers she went by whispered, "Tell him what really happened."

Thomas answered on her first knock, straightening his tie. "Nellie, have a seat."

She nodded and sat in a burgundy leather chair across his heavy oak desk from him. She had never been inside his office before. He had a large window that looked out on the city.

Thomas perched against his desk near her. "Sir Snowden is quite upset with you."

She looked up at his blue eyes. What did he think? "And I him, but I shouldn't have thrown the boot."

"I'd like to hear your side of what happened."

Nellie described the battle. Thomas nodded at each detail. She finished, and waited.

"I'll take care of it." He indicated she should stand and escorted her to the door. "Why don't you go home and look after Fannie. By tomorrow Sir Snuff will be gone."

Nellie glanced at him when Thomas called him Sir Snuff. "You knew about that, then."

"Oh yes, and I quite agree."

She giggled and he winked.

A month or so later, Nellie and Fannie were at work when Thomas escorted a miner through the factory. Nellie gestured to the new man at Sir Snuff's workbench to stop hammering so she could listen to the miner's conversation. He wore sturdy white pants made of tent material and held together with rivets.

"I'm doin' well in Nevada. Silver makes near'bout as much as gold, though the work can be hotter than ..." He glanced at Nellie and Fannie and finished, "Bacon in a frying pan."

Silver and gold mining, hmmm. She'd been thinking she might enjoy that search and perhaps do something good with the money. Here was her chance to get direct information. She put her boot on the rough wood of the bench and walked into the aisle next to the miner. "How much would you say you make in a month?"

"Probably three or four times as much as you do." He turned to Thomas. "However, I'm beginning to wonder whether it's the shopkeepers and boarding house owners who really make the most money."

Thomas smiled, and Nellie followed his thought. She could become a shopkeeper or run boarding houses for stability, to deal with the riskiness of

mining. Mining and becoming a businesswoman were an interesting combination, for sure. She was warming to this idea, she was.

Thomas glared at Nellie. She was supposed to work, not eavesdrop on their talk. She returned to her bench and risked one more question. "How much did it cost you to get to Nevada?"

The man glanced at her and the left side of his mouth smiled. "Depends on how you go. I'd have about \$500 saved if I were leaving now, just to be sure." He looked her over. How she hated when they did that. "It's not an easy life for a woman, though."

Nellie nodded. Perhaps people in the West weren't as tolerant of women as she'd been told. She picked up the boot with leather that protected the miner's leg clear up to the thigh or could be turned down, and stitched. If she were successful, she might live an adventure and make a lot of money mining. She could work as hard as any man, but why choose mining? Why not take the easy way and stay in San Francisco, like this miner suggested?

She finished the stitching and put the boot in a box to go to the next worker, who dyed the leather. Because she didn't want to sit out her life on the bench, like some water girl at a baseball game, that's why. She wanted to get outside under the great blue sky. She was not an "easy way" person. She wanted to make a lot of money, so that no one could take away her home and family ever again. And unlike those wicked English, she would help the people who struggled in life once she was rich. Only first she wanted adventure. She'd run other businesses while she mined, as he suggested. At the last second before she completely made up her mind, she remembered to ask, "Heavenly Father, what do you think?"

She worked while she waited for His answer. Just as she turned the boot over, she knew the warmth of His quiet eternal nod.

However, could she stand up to people who told her she couldn't do what she wanted to do? She thought of Thomas in Boston, though now he seemed to have mellowed about women's work – or Fannie. She'd been ignoring her for years, why not keep on? She needed to look into the details of mining more. She had to prepare!

The next day, Nellie began to gather all the facts she could on mining from newspapers and bulletins she or Thomas subscribed to. As winter came on, she also eavesdropped on the scuttlebutt in the streets where the lights were garlanded with pine in preparation for Christmas.

Right after the New Year, Nellie glanced at a copy of the *Territorial Enterprise* from Virginia City, Nevada as she worked. An article written by a reporter named Mark Twain told about the Comstock Mine where they found both gold and silver. Nellie called over the noise of hammers and sewing machines to Fannie, who worked at the bench across the aisle from her. "Perhaps I could work in Virginia City. I know how to cook, and I know how hotels work. Maybe I could even become a miner."

"Oh Nellie, for heaven's sake! You have no business going off to do men's work any more than you had taking on Sir Snuff."

Nellie frowned. "But Fannie, if I struck a promising vein, I could still care for Mum, and also find other good to do in the world."

"Mum's fine as she is. You're pretty and petite, and need to look for a nice man to marry. That's what I'm after. Why gallivant around?" Fannie gazed off across the shop at Thomas.

Nellie looked down at her hands on the boot. They were petite, as Fannie had said, only ... she just couldn't take the expected, common role of women. She threw her boot in the air. "Fannie, I'd rather be friends with many men than a cook for one."*

Fannie banged her boot down on her bench. "Ridiculous!"

Nellie laughed. "Well then, I'll love ya' forever."

Fannie stuck her tongue out at Nellie.

Nellie had reminded her of that first time she'd said this on the coffin ship when Fannie had wanted to play hide and seek. Turnabout was fair play, tongue or no tongue.

Nellie busied herself on her dreams, but as the days went by, she didn't miss that Thomas and Fannie spent more and more time together. They had fallen in love.

In 1870 Thomas proposed. Fannie ran into the house one night waving her left hand in the air, and there was a diamond engagement ring. The two of them married shortly after. Everyone, even the priest, smiled at the sparkle in their eyes. Fannie wore a floor length satin gown, and Nellie served as maid of honor. Thomas and Fannie jangled off to their honeymoon in a shiny black carriage. Nellie watched them disappear down the street. Was it a mistake not to accept the protection of a man, like Fannie had? Ridiculous, she could manage on her own. She shook off the feeling, and walked Mum home.

Since Mum and Fannie were now part of Thomas' family, Nellie worked on her plans with a vengeance. She expected Thomas to refuse to let her help support Mum, though she would anyway. Fannie didn't work in the boot factory anymore. Working beside her sister was a closed door, but each one that closed opened another. The silver strike in Virginia City pulled Nellie east. She worked overtime whenever she could throughout that year. Her tomato can of savings was almost full by Christmas. There was \$435.00 inside.

In 1871, Nellie still worked for Thomas because she wanted to have more than the \$500 the miner had suggested and every last bit of information on the Nevada mines she thought she needed. On a crisp fall day, Fannie walked past Nellie's bench headed for Thomas' office without saying a word to her. Nellie wondered what could be so important that Fannie would come to the factory.

After a while, the two of them strolled over to Nellie hand in hand. They smiled in a way that made Nellie suspect a secret. Fannie pointed to her stomach. "Guess who will be an aunt next year." Nellie whooped, but Fannie shushed her. "Please, we want to be quiet about it just now." This was wonderful news. An aunt - but she hadn't planned to be in San Francisco next year. She had wanted to spend Christmas enjoying her family and leave in early spring. Travel in winter was difficult, but when spring came and the roads cleared of mud, she had planned to be off.

She considered what to do through the holidays, and then one evening as they cleaned up after supper, she put her hand on Fannie's arm. "I'm excited about your baby. Truly, I am. However, I planned to leave in the spring for Virginia City. Fannie, I feel drawn to be in the mining camps. I think I can make money and find adventure there. Will it hurt you if I go before the baby comes?"

Fannie placed her hand on her swelling abdomen and looked Nellie in the eye. "Aw Nellie, must you go mining? Isn't there anything else, something in San Francisco, that catches your eye?"

Nellie thought how buildings sprouted connected to each other in the city. "No, mining is it. I'm not a city girl. I may be a mining camp girl. I've just got to know what it's like, to see if it's as exciting and lucrative as I imagine."



<http://webbie1.sfpl.org/multimedia/sfphotos/AAC-0588.jpg>

"Couldn't you wait then, until after the baby comes? I'd so like to have you here."

"Well, what if I visit when he, or she, arrives?"

"I suppose. Mum is here, and Thomas. Are you sure?"

"Yes, I am very sure."

On a late spring morning in 1872, she met her family at the breakfast table and announced before she even sat down, "I'm ready. I leave for the Comstock Lode in Virginia City to seek my fortune on Saturday."

Fannie began to fan her face. "So soon."

Nellie knew Fannie didn't believe she'd ever really go to the mines. "I'll be back to visit before you know it, because your little bundle isn't so little anymore. It won't be long now." She stared at Fannie's protruding middle.

Thomas rose, came around the table and patted Nellie's back.

Mum sat her milk glass on the table, a white line across her wrinkled top lip, and leveled her eyes on Nellie. She loved Mum so. When they'd talked before about the possibility of Nellie mining, Mum had reservations. *Please, Father, I can handle her reservations, but don't let this decision hurt her.* Nellie watched Mum look down at the half-eaten breakfast on her plate and, at last, back up at her. "Sure and always be after having something to back you up if you gamble your life at mining."

Nellie grinned at the permission implied in Mum's comment. She rushed around the table to hug her. "When I become a miner, you can be sure I will cook or clean, or run a store, to back myself up. And you can also be sure I will do all the good I can, assuming I make money as I expect."

"And keep me informed."

"You'll get a letter every week."

"A visit now and then would be grand, also."

"And I'll see you as often as I can."

Mum hugged her back, smiled a small smile, and nodded.

Nellie glanced at Fannie's scowl and smiled at her. "Dear sister, you have made your life. Please be happy for me as I make mine." She didn't wait for Fannie's reply. Instead, she dashed toward her room to add a package of paper and envelopes to her trunk. She had forgotten breakfast and sang *No Irish Need Apply* to the whole city.

"No Irish Need Apply"

I'm a simple Irish girl, and I'm looking for a place
I've felt the grip of poverty, but sure that's no disgrace,
'Twill be long before I get one, tho' indeed it's hard I try
For I read in each advertisement, "No Irish need apply."
Alas! For my poor country, which I never will deny,
How they insult us when they write, "No Irish need apply."
Now I wonder what's the reason that the fortune-favored few,
Should throw on us that dirty slur, and treat us as they do,
Sure they all know Paddy's heart is warm, and willing is his hand,
They rule us, yet we may not earn a living in their land,

Nellie paused for a moment. Ah yes, but this country they'd made their own had given them wonderful freedom. Then she continued:

Ah, but now I'm in the land of the "Glorious and Free,"
And proud I am to own it, a country dear to me,
I can see by your kind faces, that you will not deny,
A place in your hearts for Kathleen, where "All Irish may apply."
Then long may the union flourish, and ever may it be,
A pattern to the world, and the "Home of Liberty!"

She finished, and she could hear the talk from the breakfast table downstairs.

Thomas' base voice. "That's our Nellie. My dear, if there's a woman alive who can become a miner, it's Nellie."

“Humph!” That would be Fannie.

Nellie hoped to prove Thomas right and Fannie wrong. She wondered if the miners of Virginia City would be willing to teach her to mine.