

Chapter Six
On Her Own in Virginia City, Nevada
1872

Her hair braided on top of her head, Nellie lugged her canvas grip up the gangplank of the steamer boarding for Sacramento. She'd packed shirtwaists, her ankle-length skirts, a pair of extra shoes, white canvas men's riveted pants she'd bought from Levi Strauss without telling him who they were for, along with a cotton shirt, and a pair of Thomas's Workingmen's Cooperative Boot and Shoe Co. mining boots she'd made herself. The money she'd saved was tucked in various places, just in case someone light-fingered her grip. She felt as ready as she could manage.

The San Francisco fog lifted to reveal a brilliant summer day. When they raised the gangplank, she waved hard to her family. She wanted to stay with them, and she wanted this adventure at the same time. The adventure pulled harder. "Thomas, you take good care of them, now, or I'll take a switch to you."

Thomas hugged Fannie, who looked like she could deliver her baby any day. On the other side of him Mum stood. “Aye. Don’t worry, Nellie.”

Mum appeared to struggle to control her face. “You be after writing as soon as you get to Virginia City.”

“Sure and it will be the first thing I do after I find a place to stay. I love you, Mum.”

Fannie put a handkerchief to her eye and yelled. “And I’ll love you, forever!”

“And I you, Sister. And I you.” Maybe Fannie’s farewell meant she wasn’t quite as upset about Nellie’s choice as she’d been when she first heard it. That thought made her wonder whether she had remembered to ask God about this. So she spoke to him in thought. *Is this all right with You?* She didn’t sense an answer. Begorah! Had she run ahead of Him again?

The steamer’s engines turned to propel it into San Francisco Bay. Several seagulls squawked into the sky. Her family waved and called while the steamer’s noise and distance from the wharf swallowed their words. Nellie watched them until they became tiny dots. Then she gulped and turned to walk eastward up the deck turned gold by the rising sun. She knew she followed the footsteps of those Argonauts she’d read about who went looking for gold up this rolling Sacramento River in 1849. Could she do this alone? *Father, I can’t go without You. I have run ahead of You. I am sorry. Please speak to me. I need your courage and strength.*

Ask me first. She heard it almost aloud. *But I will go with you, and protect you.*

A tall brown-bearded man dressed in a suit stood next to the rail. He tipped his hat. “Top o’ the mornin’ to ye’.”

Nellie nodded to her fellow Irishman. “And to you.”

“Where might you be bound?”

She slowed her pace. “Virginia City.”



“As am I. The name’s Mackay. You’re headed there alone?”

Nellie stopped. Could he be the John Mackay she’d read about who had made a great deal of money in the Comstock Lode? Perhaps she could learn more about mining from him. “I’m Nellie Cashman, and to answer your question, I’m never alone. The Good Lord goes with me.”

MacKay looked at her feathered hat and skirts. “I see – you are not a nun, though.”

“And right you are. I am not a nun.”

McKay smiled. "However, since you enjoy church, I am sure you would like Saint Mary's in the Mountains, in Virginia City."

"I am pleased to hear there is a church for the miners, then." She would find St. Mary's when she arrived, and be glad for it.

"What do you plan to do on the Comstock?"

"I can cook. I plan to cook, and to learn more about mining."

Mackay glanced up at a hawk that glided above the river. "I don't know any women who mine, only the wives of miners. You may have chosen a difficult path, young lady. The heat rises to 130 degrees in the shafts during summer. The miners dig bare-chested. It's no place for a lady of your sort. Beside that, mining in Virginia City takes a great deal of money these days, what with water pumps, timber, and equipment. I know this for a fact."

Nellie straightened. "I'd like to find out for myself." She resumed her walk. Here she was, twenty-seven years old, and men were determined to tell her what to do. The mining journals and the miners who visited Thomas' factory said that placer mining could be done with no more than a wooden rocker or a metal pan, though lode mining was accomplished as Mackay had told her.

She heard his parting words, aimed at her back. "Well, you go after finding out then, but I advise you to stick to cooking. Look me up, once you get to Virginia City. My house is on D Street. It's the tall white one. You cannot miss it."

Nellie opened the steamer's cabin door, walked inside and seated herself in one of many straight-backed chairs to consider what Mackay had said. There was not a thing she could do about the man being right about her womanhood. Had she made a rash decision?

Yet, she **needed** to discover her own way. Anyone, woman or man, should be able to do that. There was nothing wrong with cooking, but it held no adventure. She could find out about timbers and heat, and she'd deal with both.

She grabbed her grip and strode back on deck headed for the bow of the steamer. The view there reminded her of their first day on the coffin ship. The wind plucked at her hair, loosening wisps near her face. Along with tossing her hair, the wind against her face spoke to her of the adventure ahead, and she smiled and sang to herself.

“Thousands Are Sailing to America”

Chorus:

So good luck to those people and safe may they land
They are leaving their country for a far distant strand
They are leaving old Ireland, no longer can stay
And thousands are sailing to America

You brave Irish heroes wherever you be
I pray stand a moment and listen to me
Your sons and fair daughters are now going away
And thousands are sailing to America.

Brave. She didn't feel brave. She felt desire, and curiosity. She gazed across the rolling waters and noticed low-lying islands where men built levees along the river and white egrets stood with hunched shoulders.

Five hours later, the steamer docked at Sacramento. Nellie talked with some of the passengers she'd met as they walked the few blocks from the wharf to the Wells Fargo office to board stage coaches for their destinations. John Mackay left the crowd to board the Central Pacific train.

At the stage, Nellie's driver offered his arm to help her onto the step, and she climbed aboard, sandwiching herself between two of the seven men already inside. There was no help for their hips touching. They were squished together like sardines in a can.

The driver whipped the horses into a lope and they headed into open meadows. The stage rocked along, now and then dropping into holes in the road. Nellie paid little attention to the creaking of the stage or the jangle of the horses' tack as she and the other passengers headed for the Sierra Nevada Mountains on the eastern side of the wide Sacramento Valley. She listened to the talk of the Comstock Lode mines and watched the sides of the road where men trudged with packs on their backs, leading mules struggling under loads of supplies.

A young miner with long blonde hair gripped the side of the coach as they bounced along. "The best thrill in the world is when I find quartz, and then I spy out the vein of gold running through."

An older man, with gray in his hair shook his head. "Not me. My thrill comes when I hit town with a bag full of nuggets."

A redheaded miner took advantage of a lull in the conversation and looked at Nellie. "Why are you headed to Virginia City, ma'am?"

"I am interested in mining." However, remembering MacKay, Nellie changed the subject. "I notice you are from Ireland. Do you like America, then?"

They swapped tales, first among live oaks, green hills, and red dirt - then among pine trees, mountain peaks and huge granite rocks. Nellie loved the pungent smell of the pines and the song of the wind through them.

They climbed on. When they gazed down on Donner Lake, named for the ill-fated party caught in the snows of the Sierras in the '40s, its blue waters reflected the blue of the sky. It seemed odd to her that such a serene place had seen such tragedy.

By the time they climbed Mt. Davidson into Virginia City, Nellie had made eight friends and found out the U.S. International Hotel had six stories and a lift. However, the miners called the lift a “rising room.” Perhaps a job waited for her there.

Nevada was brown by comparison to the green western side of the Sierra Nevada. The only things growing were purple sage, actually a gray green color, and Washoe and nut pines that barely marred the constant brown of the dirt. As they drew closer to Virginia City, Nellie realized that the dirt, which looked a red brown from a distance, actually consisted of many colors - pink, white, yellow, purple, a deep red and tan. As the horses struggled up the grade, she noticed rock outcroppings and wondered whether they indicated minerals beneath the ground. The mine tailings the miners pointed out to her around Virginia City looked white. Then as they rounded a bend, they pointed out the white steeple of St. Mary’s in the Mountains. It rose tall and white, something like a desert lighthouse.



Virginia City, 1877

Nellie left the stage at the freight depot and walked the block to the imposing church, breathing sage mixed with dust. As she walked, St. Mary's bells chimed three o'clock. A nun at the church gave Nellie the names of trustworthy boarding houses and businesses that possibly could give her employment.

Nellie climbed uphill another block, the wind picking at her skirts, to C St. She planned to try the International first. If they gave her a job, a free room might be part of the pay. The yells of men and the braying of mules and donkeys drew her to a traffic jam at the corner of B and Union. Mule teams fought for space in the street, kicking up clouds of dust. The tangle of wagons must have lasted a long time, because some of the drivers had taken out their lunches to eat while they waited.

One of the donkeys that some miner had abandoned wandered onto the boardwalk in front of Nellie. She patted his head. "Hello, Sir." He nosed her grip looking for food, then brayed as she shooed him away. He followed for a ways, nosing her back, but finally gave up and wandered off.

Among the bars and shops, she noticed a miners union, its sign proclaiming it the first in the West. Already, the miners grouped themselves to come against the owners. There always was a struggle between the rich and the poor, no matter the country.

People moved every direction, up and down the board sidewalks and across the dusty street. The sign at Piper's Opera House announced the coming visit of Lotta Crabtree, one of the greatest stars of the American stage. It would be good to see her perform, her being an Irishwoman and all. Down a block, Nellie noticed a tall building that might be the International. She headed that direction.

The hotel manager couldn't have had his nose much higher in the air. "We don't need a female in the kitchen, or the rising room. Thank you for your inquiry." He turned with a snap, and walked away.

One down, what's next? She walked back onto the street. She would take a walk around town so she could become more familiar with her new home, and find one of the boarding houses. Right across the street stood the office of the Territorial Enterprise, its entrance decorated with wrought iron gingerbread. Mark Twain had worked there when she read his stories in San Francisco. Word had it that he had not hesitated to invent news in Virginia City when there was not any to report. Nellie smiled to herself. She hoped rules, even cultural ones, were meant to be bent in the West.

On D Street, John Mackay's three-story mansion sat right on the road, flaunting a small, but in this town, wealth-indicating, green lawn at its side. She would not stop. He had already shown himself to be a controlling man. On the north end of E Street she came to Chinatown, where women in coned hats carried huge baskets of laundry. The air smelled of soap, bleach and other exotic smells she did not recognize. She found a boarding house up from China Town, and the next day, a job as a waitress in a short-order restaurant where miners could get a meal for \$1.

One morning Nellie made her way through the closely packed tables and hungry customers to serve a skillet full of eggs. A brute put his hand on her where she definitely did not want it. Begorah, what in the world! Whirling, she threatened the prospector with her skillet. "You could be wearing these eggs instead of eating them, you know."* Sure and her mouth spoke before her mind thought, again.

The miner, a big man, stared at her for a second, then bent clear over his plate with laughter, banging his fist on the table. "I believe you'd have done it, little lady. And I reckon you'd have been right to do it. I'm Big John, and I'm proud to meet you."

Well then, standing up for herself worked quite well in a mining camp. She leveled her gaze on him. "To the first, that I would. And to the second, that I would."* She turned back to her task and spoke, moving away from him. "My name is Nellie Cashman. I'll let you know whether I'm proud to meet you when I see how you behave next time you are in here." Miners at other tables laughed and applauded.

In Virginia City, the citizens lived under straightforward rules and regulations made at Gold Hill. Gold Hill was a town a little ways down the steep road to the south of Virginia City. The two towns had merged as more and more people arrived with silver in their eyes. The laws said that a person convicted of taking another person's life on purpose would be hung by the neck till they were dead. A person who stole things would be whipped or thrown out of town. The court used fines or other penalties for other crimes, and gambling was not allowed, though Nellie saw it happening all the time.

Almost every day she finished her shift at the restaurant, ran to her tiny room and dressed in her pants, shirt and boots. Then she'd join one miner or another she'd talked with in the restaurant to see their mine. Young Abe led her through the tailings at the Empire Mine. "When we started looking for gold, we threw away the black dirt. However, it just so happened that the black dirt turned many of us into millionaires because it was full of silver! You can bet we stopped throwing it away."

"I should think so. How do you get the silver out of the dirt?"

“That’s the expensive part.” He launched into a long description of the extraction of silver.

When he finished, she picked up a handful of dirt. “Are you named for Abraham Lincoln?”

“Yep. Hope nobody assassinates me.”

Another day she followed mine superintendent, Philip Deidesheimer, who showed her the square-set timbers he’d invented. “Now the mines won’t cave in no matter how far down we have to dig. We use the square-cut timbers to set up rooms on different levels below the earth next to the silver veins. Would you like to see?”

She smiled and nodded. “And I’d love to have a look.”

They walked into a miner’s cage, and he pointed a finger skyward. “Look up. See the flat woven wire cable up there?”

“Yes.”

“The old hemp rope we used would not hold up a miner’s cage. It broke and caused cages and the men inside to fall down the shafts, some as deep as 2,000 feet. Andrew Hallidie of San Francisco developed that flat woven wire cable. You can see it’s about 4 inches wide and a half inch thick. We attached it to the cages. Now no more miners die, at least not from cages falling.”

It was hot in the mine, and men did work shirtless, just as MacKay had told her. Miners turned their backs when they realized a woman was in the mine, even if they knew her. One turned just enough so she could hear him. “Miss Nellie, did you bring anything to drink with ye?”

“Not this time. But I’ll be sure to next time.” At that moment, she made up her mind. “Every man who needs it, gets my help, whether it’s cold water, a hot meal, nursing, mothering or whatever else they need. After all, we pass this way only once. It’s up to us to help our fellows when they need our help.* Perhaps this was why God had sent her west.

Deidesheimer led her back toward the cage. Turning to enter, she overheard a couple of miners who had leaned on their picks to rest a bit. “She’s young, but she’s got pluck, I’ll give her that. I mean, look how she’s given up her skirts to wear mining pants.”

Her back to them, and feeling a little embarrassed because Deidesheimer could hear the miners too, she heard the other’s voice. “One day when I was in that café where she works, she paid for my food with her tip money when I came up short. She’s a kind lady all right, and one who will not be toyed with. You hear that story about Big John?”

“Yep.”

Nellie and Deidesheimer rode back to the surface in the cage. She didn’t talk, because she was considering what the miners had said. She guessed maybe she had come to care for these mining men, before today.

As the days went by, in addition to John Mackay and Deidesheimer, she met L.R. Bradley, O’Brien, Flood and others of the silver kings because of her habit of going to the mines to learn.

Letters came from Fannie and Mum once or twice a month. Nellie tried to send hers as often. One of Mum’s letters said Fannie and Thomas were the proud parents of a baby boy whom they’d named Thomas, after his father. The letter was full of news of

baby clothes and furniture. Nellie went to a silversmith in town and ordered a tiny ring made from Comstock silver shipped to baby Thomas. She added a note. "Congratulations to the three of you. I can't come right now. I'll come as soon as I can. Give my love to Mum."

In the late spring of 1872 the miners, whom she'd come to think of as her "boys," began to talk of Virginia City's mines failing. One would say, "I know Sutro's Tunnel is meant to bring fresh air into the mines and the extra water out, but it isn't working so well."

Another would agree, and add, "Sure and the mines are bringing in less money."

Each day in the restaurant, and sometimes down in the mines themselves, she heard, "I am thinking it's time we be after moving on."

One day Nellie was picking up plates from the cook's window. She respected him. He worked hard, and never acted like anything but a gentleman. He had worked in Virginia City much longer than she, and had heard the miner's conversations, too. She cocked her head at him. "I wonder whether I'd best be moving on myself?"

His answer followed her as she hurried to deliver the plates she balanced on her arms. "Hard to say. Things can change. They're not looking too good right now, though."

In July of 1872, Nellie traveled back to San Francisco. She finally had the chance to hold and coo at Thomas and Fannie's Thomas Junior, whom they'd nicknamed T.J. Mum, now over 70 years old, only gave him up for a little while as she listened to her daughter's latest scheme. They sat in the parlor, Nellie in the rocking chair. Thomas and Fannie had taken an opportunity for a night on the town, which pleased Nellie, because she wanted a chance to talk with Mum alone.

“Mum, there is something happening all the time when you live in a mining camp. The miners are good men, for the most part, probably more honest than here in San Francisco. I heard the robber barons here invest in the mines and then move the money they make over here to build banks and mansions.” Nellie rocked Thomas, Jr. back and forth. “I believe the boys have mined most of Virginia City’s silver from the ground. However, I’ve been reading in the papers of a town in southeastern Nevada, Pioche, where they’re finding new ore.” Little T.J. began to fidget, and she slipped her knuckle into his mouth. He began to suck, and she put a finger of her other hand in his little fist. “I’ve made good money serving the miners, even saved some, enough to open a boarding house. I have an idea we could make nearly as much money as the miners, and surely on a more day-to-day basis, by providing their need for food and shelter. Would you come with me to open this boarding house? I miss you, and you know so much that I have not attended to about keeping house.”

Nellie knew Mum had read and re-read her letters of steamers, stage coaches, the mines and violence in Virginia City. Mum watched her rock the baby. “Let me think about it. Can you give me till tomorrow morning?”

“Longer, if you need it.”