

## **Chapter Seven**

### **Birth of a Mining Woman**

#### **Pioche, Nevada**

**1872 – 1873**

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Nellie dreamed she had fallen down a mine shaft, and clawed her way back up the rocky side. Just as her head rose above ground, she woke bone cold, because she'd "clawed" her covers off. Gray light filtered through the filmy curtains at her window, so she put her wrapper on, and went to the kitchen for water. As she passed T.J.'s nursery door, he pulled himself to the side of the crib and grinned at her.

She went in and pulled him into her arms. "Good morning, lad." He put his head in the crook of her neck as she climbed down the stairs.

Mum heard them and turned from the soda bread she'd made as Nellie put him on her hip and came into the kitchen. "I have decided to go with you to Pioche. However, you have to agree then, that when you can run the boarding house on your own, I return to San Francisco."

Nellie kissed Mum on the cheek. "And that you can!"

"Fannie will be more peeved than when you left for Virginia City. I help her with T.J., you know."

"Oh. I hadn't thought." Could it be that she had come to put her mining dreams above her family? She could learn to run the boarding house without Mum, but it would be much better with her.

Mum came to take T.J. "She can get along now. I have shown her all she needs."

Mum felt Fannie could mother on her own, but should she? Perhaps Mum, too, wanted adventure. "But I do not want her to feel I have taken you from her."

"We will talk with her."

Nellie didn't hear that talk. Mum must have dealt with Fannie alone, then. To Nellie's relief, when Fannie waved goodbye to them out the front door about a week later, she smiled. "I'll love you forever." They said it almost in unison.

Nellie and Mum rode the Central Pacific Railroad to Battle Mountain, Nevada because it cost \$70 less each than the stage. Besides, Nellie's experience with stage coaches had taught her traveling by train was far more comfortable. They climbed off in Battle Mountain, in the 100 degree heat of late August, and boarded the short line to Austin, where there were more silver fields. Then they rode first one hot, dusty stage, then another, to travel to the southeastern edge of Nevada. There were no trains in that region.

Nellie worried that though Virginia City had been a rough mining camp, Pioche was rumored to be lawless, ruled by gunslingers, the most notorious camp in Nevada,

perhaps in the whole West. She had read in a newspaper in Austin that the Nevada State Mineralogist reported to the State Legislature:

About one-half of the community are thieves, scoundrels and murderers and then we have some of the best folks in the world, and I don't know but our lives and property are just as safe as with you. You can go uptown and get shot very easily if you choose, or you can live peacefully.

When they were helped from the stage on Pioche's main street, they both looked uphill. Pioche was perched like a risk on the side of a mountain. Saloons lined the street, and it appeared to Nellie that drunken men stumbled out of every door or brawled in the street. A man named O'Hallihan had ridden with them. He swiped his forehead with a handkerchief. "Rumor has it that 75 people were murdered before one natural death occurred here. Looking at these scalawags, I imagine that does not surprise you much. They buried them at Boot Hill. It is down there past the courthouse."



*Pioche, Nevada in 1872*

Nellie turned and looked the way he pointed, but she didn't see a graveyard.

He put his hand on her arm. "Many from the auld sod have made their way to the West, and some of them into Boot Hill. Do you ladies have guns or knives?"

Nellie considered the likelihood of making money in Pioche more important than possible violence. She shifted her feet so his hand dropped from her arm. “We’ll need to locate our boarding house on a peaceful street.”

O’Hallihan shrugged. “I have a house at Panaca Flat. It’s much quieter there, but it is about 10 miles to the south. Might be a good place for you, but the purchase of a gun would still be a fine idea.”

Mum had been gazing about at the town, but his words snapped her head to stare at O’Hallihan.

Nellie frowned. “No guns. The Good Lord will care for us.” God brought them from Ireland on that horrid coffin ship, settled them in the Irish slums in Boston, and landed them in San Francisco. He could protect them here, too.

Mum nodded. “Mr. O’Hallihan, could you tell us how we might get to Panaca Flat? Is there a stage or a livery where we might rent horses?”

Was Mum frightened about the danger here? Nellie couldn’t read her face.

“I have a wagon at the livery. I’d be happy to give you a ride. There’s no hotel at Panaca, though. Would you like to stay with my family while you decide how to proceed?”

Nellie wondered if they could trust him.

Mum thought for a moment. “Certainly, that would be good of you.” Mum was purposeful and tough. She would do fine in this mining camp.

As they rode along, Mum, who sat on the wagon seat next to O’Hallihan, talked to him about the valley, the water and the people. The road meandered down onto a valley floor and Nellie could see the little town nestled there. She heard their

conversation in snatches from the back where she was perched among the luggage. She began to consider what their next steps might be. She had not been involved in actual mining in Virginia City. However, she had gathered plenty of knowledge. The boys who had panned for gold realized the faster they could get ore out of the ground, the faster they'd make money. Miners had added Long Toms, coyote holes, cradles and flume sluices. However, when silver became their dream, they dug great holes into the ground to mine faster. Nellie had seen all this and understood how to work the equipment. In Pioche, she planned to get her hands dirty.

They stayed with the O'Hallihans while they made arrangements to open the Miner's Boarding House in a two-story brick building on Main Street in Panaca Flat.. They advertised in the 1872 Pioche Daily Record with Mum as the proprietress. Mum's food was as delicious as ever and they kept the rooms clean as a whistle.

As they cleaned, Nellie picked Mum's brain. She flipped a sheet in the air, and Mum caught the edge. "Do you think I could operate a long tom or a sluice on my own, Mum?"

"I suppose. I know you love being outdoors, but I have a thought. If you used the profits from our place to invest in mines, you could have the muscles of the men to help you."

"I cannot work inside, every hour of every day. I need to smell the sage and see the changes in the sky."

"If you hire workers, you'll work inside and outside, keeping track of the progress and making sure all have what they need to accomplish their tasks."

“Mum, you are a genius entirely!” She would talk to the boys as soon as they were finished with the day’s work.

A few days later, Nellie considered the offer she’d been made by a mine owner she’d approached. She left the general store as Tim, an old miner who ate and sometimes had a bath at the boarding house when he was in town, stopped to talk with another miner on the boardwalk. When he saw Nellie, Tim slapped his friend on the back. “If you’re hungry or need a bath, the Miner’s Boarding House is the best around.” She smiled and winked at Tim. Then she hurried toward the Connerton Ice Cream Parlor that operated as part of an ice house across from their boarding house. It claimed to be the first ice cream parlor west of the Mississippi. She and Mum were planning chocolate ice cream for dessert that night.

Fourteen miners, washed and pressed, gathered around the table finishing their chocolate ice cream after dinner, when Patrick, the first one done, “huhed” vapor on his spoon and hung it on the end of his nose. “And can any of you do this?”

“Hey, how do you do that?”

Patrick took the spoon off his nose, huhed again, and rehung it.

Nellie laughed, and Mum right after her. They huhed on their spoons, and hung them on their noses. Mum’s fell off and splattered the melted ice cream left in her bowl on the miner next to her.

In a moment, the spoon-hanging was an epidemic, but the laughter that followed made most of the spoons fall off and no one survived having ice cream splashed on their clothes.

Patrick rose to go up to bed. “Miss Cashman, I’ve got to say, you’ve got the best belly laugh I’ve ever heard from a woman.”

Spoon-hanging times gave way to violence one night in November. Mum and Nellie had finished the dishes, and Nellie hung the flour sack towel on the oven door to dry when they heard a commotion in the Headquarters Saloon next door. They gave each other worried looks. Nellie listened for the banging to end, then rushed out the front door.

“Nellie, wait!” She heard Mum scream, but she was half way there already.

Dave Neagle, an Irish mining engineer, had James Woods at gunpoint when she slowed herself to open the saloon door. He kept his eyes on Woods as he spoke. “Woods didn’t care for the way McCarty played faro.” Bill McCarty lay on the floor in a pool of blood.

Nellie knew Neagle to be a good man. She glanced at him. “You would make as good a sheriff as an engineer, and that is the truth.”

He inclined his head. “If you would send someone after the real one, I would be grateful.”

Nellie hiked her skirts and dashed through the dusty street to the jail to summon the sheriff. That fine man handcuffed Woods and wrestled him off to jail. McCarty had died, so the boys carried him out to bury in Boot Hill. Perhaps Panaca wouldn’t remain peaceful as they had thought.

When 1872 had turned to 1873, Nellie read one morning in the Pioche paper that John Mackay and James Fair’s Consolidated Virginia Mine had struck the largest silver deposit on the North American continent. They expected it to deliver more than

\$100,000,000 in silver. She read the paper to Mum over breakfast. “Phew, and I sure guessed that one wrong.”

Mum nodded, but didn’t have much to say. She seemed tired.

They worked to make the boarding house even more comfortable that year, adding flowered wallpaper and goosedown pillows. Mum encouraged her to advertise herself as proprietress. The day Nellie went to Pioche to run the ad, Mum called to her as she drove off in the buggy. “Why don’t we rename the boarding house the Cashman Boarding House? After I return to Fannie, you will be all set as proprietress.” Nellie had loved having Mum’s company, instruction and help, and wished she didn’t have to keep her promise about Mum going back to San Francisco.

She considered as she drove the horse up the hill to Pioche. They had plenty of work each day. They cooked breakfast, lunch and dinner together. Nellie had memorized all Mum’s recipes. The two of them changed bedding and towels, cleaned and often cared for those down on their luck. Nellie enjoyed the people of Panaca. They were down-to-earth, straightforward and kind, and she had served most of them in one way or another.

That’s how it happened that one day when she’d finished her work at the boarding house and was buttoning the last button on her mining shirt getting ready to go out and talk to one of the mine owners, Dave Neagle ran in the front door. She heard him yell. “Nellie!”

“And what - the devil has you by the tail?” She rushed down the hall.

“A rattler bit a greenhorn. The boys are bringing him here ...”



Just then, two miners pushed through the door with a man lying on a wooden plank. His battered black hat lay over his head. Nellie would have believed him dead, except he groaned.

She rushed ahead and pointed through a door. The men rolled the man onto the bed. As they did, his hat fell to the floor.

Nellie's mouth fell open. "Sir Snuff." No, she would not help that English hyena. He was as evil as the wicked country that bore him. No.

Sir Snuff looked up, recognized her, and struggled to rise from the bed.

*I love the English as well as the Irish.* Oh Father, no. You heard what he said in San Francisco. And he hates me, and I will tell you the truth, I hate him, too. Surely someone else could care for him. *I sent him to you, Nellie.* But I was about to go check on a mine that I might be able to make a lot of money through. I could do good with that money. ... *Silence.*

"No, you stay there." She gently pushed him back down. "I suppose I owe you something, entirely, for when I threw that boot at the shoe factory that helped you lose your job."

"I don't trust you, Irish wench." Sir Snuff again attempted to rise.

"And I'm all you've got. There is no doctor in Panaca Flat. It doesn't matter that you're an English big mouth, I'll take care of you well. Where's the bite?"

Sir Snuff now sat stiff and silent as a stone on the edge of the bed.

A miner answered. "His leg. He got off the stage, went behind a building to relieve himself, and surprised the rattler."

Sir Snuff glared at the man. "I can speak for myself!"

Nellie turned to the miners. “Bring more pillows from the next room and a sharp knife and baking soda from the kitchen.”

Mum had come in. “I’ll get the knife and soda.”

Nellie added the pillows to the one on the bed and again gently pushed him down so that they held his head and shoulders higher than the bite she had uncovered. She had exposed two reddening puncture wounds. Mum came in with the knife and baking soda. Nellie gave Sir Snuff a washcloth. “Put this between your teeth.”

“Hold his pant leg up past the bite.” Mum did, and Nellie cut an X, then pasted the soda over the bite.

“The best thing is to keep your heart higher than the bite and rest. Would you like water or something to eat?”

“No.”

“If all goes well, you may resume your activities in the morning. Rattler’s bites aren’t as bad as scorpion’s. We will bring you dinner when it is time.” Nellie didn’t wait for his reply.

Sir Snuff threw the last word rock. “So now you’re dressing as a man. Disgusting.”

She left for the mine. She had obeyed God, but she didn’t care much whether the hyena got better or not, or what he thought of her. Mum could bring him the water and whatever else he got, if anything.

She’d seen the new hydraulic mining going on outside town. In the mine she was considering investing in, the miners hosed the ore and silt from the ground with blasts of water that left places that used to have hills with no hills, ran topsoil down into ravines,

but extracted the ore. “Yep, we move tons of earth to find small amounts of ore, but it’s worth a bundle,” the mine owner told her.

“Do you replace the dirt?”

He lowered his eyebrows, and his answer seemed a question. “No.”

“We have so little water.”

“We have enough to get the ore out of the ground.”

Nellie understood the need for this, but she wondered whether their well water would run out. Could changing the face of the earth have consequences they did not consider? She decided not to put her money in a place that had so many unanswered questions and returned to Panaca. When she woke in the morning, Sir Snuff was gone. Good.

Not everyone had gone to hydraulic mining, though. One July afternoon late, when Mum had help at the boarding house and the heat of the day began to cool, Nellie climbed down into a sandy wash to look for Tim, who’d invited her to pan for gold with him. A heavy rain had flooded the wash that ran with brown water. She discovered Tim about a half mile down because he sang off-key.

Tim tipped his battered hat when he saw her. “Good day to ya, Miss Nellie.” Then he handed her his rusty pan. “Try it.”

Nellie accepted the rusty pan and dipped it into the water that gurgled through the wash. “You ever considered using a sluice?”

“Nope, there’s only water in the washes during the monsoon. Wouldn’t be worth it.”

“I have invested in a silver mine, but not the hydraulic kind. I feel like that may be a mistake.” She caught up sand and gravel in the bottom of the pan then looked up at him. “Have I got it right?”

Tim grinned at her, his eyes twinkling under bushy gray eyebrows. “Yep, that and staying out of hydraulic mining, to my way of thinking. Shift it back and forth. The gold is heavier than the sand and such, and will stay in the bottom of the pan if you are gentle. There’s fool’s gold, iron pyrites, that glitters like the very devil, but you can break it with your fingernail. You can’t break real gold.”

The sinking Nevada sun turned the western sky shades of pink, purple and orange as Nellie slid the pan left and right.

Tim watched her slosh water and sand out of the pan. “Nellie, women could be better at this than men. Must be your gentle nature.”

“Aw, Tim.” Nellie eyed the pan. “I believe I see a glint there.”

Tim pulled out a nugget the size of a pea with his wrinkled thumb and forefinger and handed it to her. “You’re a lucky woman. I don’t find them this big too much anymore, Miss Nellie. You mined it, and sure and it is yours.”

Nellie’s eyes glimmered like the gold. “And I’m a miner at last!” She scrambled up the bank poking the nugget with her finger.

Tim labored up the same way Nellie had come. “Would you drink a spot of coffee with me before you head back to Panaca, then?”

She did a little jig step. “I’d be proud to drink your coffee. You, after all, have just made me rich.”

At Tim's camp, it took a bit to build the fire and warm up that morning's coffee, so they talked and watched the sky darken while they waited. Tim leaned back on a large rock. "This is a mighty poor way to mine, but I like it over all that newfangled stuff the bankers promote. I am gettin' mighty old, though, and I have about run out of grubstake. I may have to become a shopkeeper one of these days, after all."

Nellie read his sad smile. "Is that what you want to do?"

"Nope, had my way, I would be out here under the stars when the good Lord carries me home."

Nellie sat her coffee cup on a hot rock near the fire. "Tim, I would grubstake you for a share of what you find. How much would you need?"

"Another couple hundred would keep me for a piece. What cut would you want?"

Nellie looked him in the face. "Twenty-five percent sound all right?"

"Those blue eyes of yours are nothing if they ain't honest. Deal."

"You come in tomorrow, and I will give you the money."

They sipped the strong coffee and traded a few stories.

As the stars came out, she taught him one of her favorite songs about the role of the Irish in the War Between the States. She chose it because it contained Tim's name.

### **The Irish Volunteer**

My name is Tim McDonald, I'm a native of the isle,  
I was born among old Erin's bogs when I was but a child,  
My father fought in "Ninety-eight," for liberty so dear;  
He fell upon old Vinegar Hill, like an Irish volunteer.

Then raise the harp of Erin, boys, the flag we all revere-  
We'll fight and fall beneath its folds, like Irish volunteers!  
Then raise the harp of Erin, boys, the flag we all revere -  
We'll fight and fall beneath its folds, like Irish volunteers!

The stars revealed themselves one by one like gold nuggets in the pan of the dark sky. She had stayed longer than she should have, so she threw her coffee into the dark and stood. "Thank you for this day, Tim."

"My pleasure. You come visit anytime, Miss Nellie. Here, take my lantern. You'll need it to make your way back. I'll pick it up when I come into town."

She held the lantern out in front of her and strode into the night, "I'll see you then."

Nellie decided to donate the nugget she'd panned to the Catholic Church in Pioche. It seemed right that her first nugget be given to God since He created it, and all. She enjoyed knowing that her money was doing God's work. She enjoyed it so much that she and a friend made \$389 on refreshments and cigars they sold during a Ladies Fair in October. The money went to help the farmers who'd lost their land in Ireland to buy it back. In her mind, she saw her neighbors in Middleton bundling up their things and moving back into their cottages.

In November Mum and Nellie sat near a cozy fire drinking tea when Mum spoke. "You know how to run the best boarding house around. I grow tired, m'girl. Do you think you could go on alone? I'd like to return to Fannie in San Francisco before Christmas."

Nellie took another sip of tea and looked about her at the wallpapered walls and the crystal gas lamps. Was it her family or the miners God had meant were more important than making money when she prayed at the church in Boston? "I believe I'm ready for a change, too, Mum. The boys are drifting off. I was a little hasty about Virginia City, what with Mr. Mackay's huge find, and all, but the ore has declined, and I think will all but disappear soon."

“You don’t have to come with me, Nellie. I can make it back on my own. You can do anything you set your mind to now. You are one determined lass. Sort of remind me of me.”

“No, that is not it. Some of the boys are headed for San Francisco. I will go with you, and visit Fannie before I decide what to do next.” After all, she felt confident that she could either mine or run a boarding house now, maybe even a restaurant.

They sold the boarding house on October 17 to Jacobs and Sultan. Nellie wondered whether she should choose the security of San Francisco, or look for where her next adventure might wait.