

Father Nash spied the tall, dark haired woman in the garden, long before she realized he was watching her. He thought he recognized her but couldn't be sure.

"That you Helen Rae?" he shouted.

Nellie spotted the figure in the rectory window and wrapped her arms around her waist. She instantly recognized the familiar pangs of Catholic guilt. She hadn't been to church for years and almost felt remorseful for having to unburden her woes on the elderly Priest.

"Yes Father, it's me Nellie."

"Thought so, child."

Nellie smiled. He used that term of endearment for everyone from eight to eighty.

He gave her a quick nod and a wink, "Be right down Helen Rae." The priest was one of the few people who used her given name.

Nellie waved and walked the stone path that lead to his house. *He was ancient when I was a kid, bet he's older than Christ now.* She reached the veranda and found him sitting crooked in a rocker.

"Heard you was back on the coast," he gestured towards a worn blue vinyl chair, "what brings you by today, child?"

Nellie sat down. A low wooden table wobbled between them. "Well, I wanted to ask-" She was abruptly cut off. *Maybe he's gone hard of hearing in his ancient years?*

"Doris!" he bellowed towards the screen door. "Bring coffee would ya, two of em, and don't forget my sugar."

Doris appeared promptly and Nellie jumped up to help her with the door. "Nellie dear, it's so nice to see you," she said, as she balanced the tray on the rickety table. Doris wore a starched green gingham dress and sensible white shoes. "I bet your Ma is real glad to have you home again!"

Nellie swallowed hard. *How do they not know about my mother?*

She took a bite from the warm chewy oatmeal cookie. "Actually, I really just came back for your delicious baking," Nellie teased. Doris had been taking care of Father for as long as anyone could remember. Nobody knew much about her, and she wasn't the type you could ask outright. To most everyone, she was an enigma.

"Alright Doris, that'll be all, run along." Father dismissed her with a giant wave of his arm. Doris clucked, and the door banged behind her. *Funny how some things never change, one had to wonder how she put up with him and why? It was a mystery.*

Father Nash leaned back in the maple rocker and popped a cube into his mouth. He took a long sip of strong black coffee. The heat dissolved the sugary sweetness instantly and he reached for another. "So Helen Rae, what do I owe this visit?"

“Where to start,” Nellie focused on the abundant peace roses, breathing in the sweet fruity fragrance. “I don’t know, I need --”

He supported his chin with his large hands and looked directly at her. “Why, start at the beginning child, of course.”

“Father, I need to talk to you about my mother, but I haven’t been to confession or mass regularly, and I don’t even know where to begin.” Nellie’s concentrated on a large knot in one of the porch slats.

“Now that’s a good start, I’m listening.”

Nellie looked from Father to the screen door and back.

“Ah, don’t worry about that old bird. She’s heard it all over the years, and then some.”

“If it’s all the same to you, I’d be more comfortable coming to the confessional with Julia.”

“Then I’ll expect you and your sister on Tuesday, Helen Rae. 10am sharp.” He stood, releasing her from the conversation.

Nellie reached for the tray. “Nah, leave it child, she’ll get vicious if you do her job,” he said, loud enough to bring Doris running.

Nellie skipped down the path that had brought her. She felt light and giddy. *Maybe this is what hope feels like!*