

Second Chances

Second Chances

ISBN: 0-7388-6978-3

Published 2002 by Xlibris
<http://www.Xlibris.com>

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Copyright © 2002 by Nina Osier

All Rights Reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

This sample manufactured in the United Kingdom.

<http://www.ebookheaven.co.uk>

2002

Books by Nina Osier

Order in paperback:

[Starship Castaways](#)
[Conduct Unbecoming](#)
[Silent Service](#)
[Unfamiliar Territory](#)
[The Way To Freedom](#)
[Mistworld](#)
[Exile's End](#)
[Regs](#)
[Granite Island](#)
[Second Chances](#)

Order in ebook:

[Starship Castaways](#)
[Conduct Unbecoming](#)
[Silent Service](#)
[Unfamiliar Territory](#)
[The Way To Freedom](#)
[Mistworld](#)
[Exile's End](#)
[Regs](#)
[Granite Island](#)
[Second Chances](#)

Visit Nina's website
[Nina Osier's Homepage](#)

Chapter 1

Medical smells. Antiseptics, body fluids, fear. Jan Franklin hated them, and she had her reasons. She had spent too many years out of her life surrounded by those odors, so it was always an effort to make herself enter a hospital when her profession required that of her.

It was even harder than usual tonight, but she did it. She walked up to the reception desk at Memorial Medical Center, and she asked in her usual controlled way: “Room number for Kevin Franklin, please?” And then she went up the stairs, not bothering to wait for the elevator, and walked down the wide corridor to his room.

MMC had been “Memorial Hospital,” not “Memorial Medical Center,” forty years ago when Jan and Kevin sat clinging to each other’s hands in its waiting room because children were not allowed anywhere else unless they were patients. They had stayed there, a little boy of four and a little girl of six, until their father came to tell them that Mama had gone to heaven to be with Jesus.

“But Jesus doesn’t need Mama! And I do!” Kevin had screamed, and Daddy had smacked his bottom.

Jan had stood still, and had clenched her small fists to keep herself from hitting Daddy in retaliation. Both because she was convinced, in some part of her mind, that her all-powerful father could have interceded with his God and have kept Mama here on Earth if he’d really wanted to do so-and because she hated it when Daddy smacked Kevin.

He’d never done that to her, but only because he believed that grown men should not touch little girls there. Spanking Jan had been Mama’s job, and

Mama hadn't done it half as often as Daddy had thought it was needed.

Far, far less often than Daddy hit Kevin, that was for sure.

The memory was cold and bitter, like a taste of metal in her mouth now, as Jan walked into the private room and stood beside her baby brother's bed. He had an IV in his arm, but otherwise he was free from medical encumbrances. He looked pale, and skinny, and a lot younger than his forty-three years.

And the place where his left leg should have been, looked so empty that only her long experience as a reporter made it possible for Jan to stare at that spot for a moment before she let herself look away.

"Ms. Franklin? I'm Dr. Barter." The physician was young, and female, and pretty. And unfamiliar, which meant she must be new on staff. "You'd be Mr. Franklin's sister."

"Yes." Jan put out a hand, automatically, in greeting. "How's he doing?"

"Physically? He's listed in good condition. I'm sorry, but you aren't listed as his next of kin. So that makes discussing his treatment with you just a little bit awkward for me, I'm sure you'll understand...?"

Jan felt equal parts of relief and fury welling up inside her. Between them the two strong emotions almost closed her throat. But she managed to nod, and she managed to say in her professional tone because it was the one that came out unbidden, "I see. Tom Croft's probably on his record as 'person to be notified.' Isn't he?"

Dr. Barter looked at the older woman with curiosity in her eyes. And, perhaps, with some disapproval as well. She answered quietly, "Yes. So if you want specifics about your brother, you'll have to talk to Mr. Croft. I'm sorry."

"It's all right." Jan sighed. "Any reason I can't sit with Kevin for a few minutes? Now that I'm here?"

At least she should be able to do that. It had taken such an effort of will to come here at all, that she wasn't about to just turn around and walk out. And besides, getting information that someone else really didn't want her to have was a familiar part of her job-so she had confidence that if she stayed around for awhile, she could find out a lot more than this young physician would ever realize.

"Help yourself," Barter decided, after looking at Jan for a moment longer. "I really am sorry, Ms. Franklin. This situation is-well-unusual."

Nothing about the Franklin family has ever been usual! Jan wanted to reply. But she nodded instead, and she smiled.

Calmly, coolly, and professionally.

Kevin didn't move, except for the rise and fall of his chest as he breathed. He was gaunt, and that didn't look good on him because he had a large frame. His cheeks were stubbled and sunken. But when Jan put her hand on his wrist, she found a strong and steady pulse under her fingers.

He had survived losing his leg, months earlier and two oceans away from Starks Harbor, Maine. Before that, he had survived more than two decades of a life spent in the world's various war zones. And before that, he had survived growing up in Daddy's house and attempting to become the kind of man that Daddy had wanted him to be.

Or at least, passively going along with Daddy's program; until the day had come when he couldn't do that anymore.

But just about everything Jan Franklin knew about her little brother's adult life, she knew from other people's accounts (or, to be more accurate, from Starks Harbor gossip!). The last time she had seen Kevin, or had spoken to him, she had been sixteen years old and her brother had been fourteen. Small for his age, not yet showing a hint that he would one day grow into the big man who was lying unconscious in front of her now; a quiet child, whose public outburst at their mother's death had astounded his more volatile big sister. And she hadn't even known, on that morning when Daddy had loaded her into the car and had driven her to Bangor, that she wouldn't see Starks Harbor again-or Kevin-or anyone or anything that was familiar from her childhood, for nearly thirty years.

He was going to make it, physically at least. Her own observations had confirmed what the doctor had told her, and sitting here any longer when her brother clearly wasn't going to wake up anytime soon would serve no purpose. She had a paper to operate, she had work to do. So Janice Franklin stood up, and bid Kevin farewell by lightly touching his cheek with her fingertips.

He was going to make it, this time. But she was having a lot of trouble believing that the "accident" in which he'd almost drowned in the waters off Croft and Son's Lobster Pound had been any such thing. She found herself wondering as she stood in his room's doorway and took one last look: Just what had happened to give him a final push from the depression that had kept him housebound ever since his homecoming, over the edge into suicidal despair? Had it been one of those old letters, made public at last and promising to bring more disgrace than Kevin's already-damaged spirit could endure?

In any event, for him to be lying there still breathing had cost another man his life. And in the parsonage where small Janice and Kevin had lived four decades ago, a woman was trying to figure out how she was supposed to bring a baby into the world without the man who'd fathered it at her side.

When Kevin woke up at last and found all that out, just how was he going

to react?

Jan walked quickly down the corridor to the elevator, and leaned against its rear wall during the short ride from third floor to first. She closed her eyes, and she drew in a series of deep, careful, cleansing breaths.

Yes, that trick still worked. By the time the door started to open, she had her demons caged again.

And then she saw the man who was walking across the lobby toward the elevator, and she knew that her face was turning stark white with shock.

Which was swiftly followed by the crimson flush of fury. She'd known this moment must come, ever since Kevin and his long-time companion had come back to Starks Harbor to live in the house on the bluff overlooking the pound. If she had realized this would happen, when the *Bayside Press* had come up for sale and her friend Lucie Moore had offered Jan a partnership, she would never have considered coming back here herself. But it had seemed perfectly safe, at the time! Tom Croft and Kevin Franklin were somewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, plying their despicable trade as trainers of third world countries' armies. They would go on doing that, more than likely, until one day their lives ended as such men's lives nearly always did. In blood and violence, in the flash of knives or the tearing impact of bullets; in just what they'd misspent their adult lives teaching other men how to do.

So Jan had come home, because she wanted to and because the opportunity was there. And now she was looking up into Tom Croft's face, because she hadn't paused at the elevator and waited for him to come to her.

She no longer lived her life that way. She had crossed the lobby to meet him, with a firm stride and with her head held high. And she spoke first, in the way she'd so carefully taught herself to do. "Tommy. It's been a long time."

Clichéd words, and automatic use of the name by which she'd always called him. Not a good beginning, for all her take-the-high-ground approach.

His eyes widened with what looked for all the world like genuine, innocent pleasure. He was even taller than Kevin had become, and his appearance now more than fulfilled all the promises of his boyhood. He was broad of shoulder, slim of hip, and still deeply tanned from years of outdoor work in tropical climates. His dark hair was cut short, and there was a sprinkling of silver in it that had the perfectly damnable effect of making him look distinguished in the dress shirt and slacks that he'd worn to Augusta today.

If you'd been around home where you belonged, Kevin could never have taken that boat out, Janice thought with illogical but satisfying bitterness. You would have been at the wharf when he got there, and you'd have stopped him. And none of this would be happening now!

"Jan! God, I hoped you'd come!" He actually had the gall to reach for her,

to put out his arms with the clear intention of pulling her into them.

She sidestepped. Quickly. And she knew that the two angry, crimson spots on her cheeks were turning into a full-body flush. She said in a calm, controlled, yet rudely clipped voice, “I came to see Kevin. I did that. And now I’m leaving. Good-bye, Tommy.”

She hadn’t been allowed to say that to him, all those years earlier. There was something elementally satisfying about being able to say it to him now, and about following the words by walking deliberately away and leaving him standing there alone and clearly bewildered.

Which might give him, perhaps, just the smallest taste of everything he had put her through—because it was thanks to Tom Croft that Janice Franklin knew just what it felt like to hit the wall that her little brother Kevin had slammed up against today. To become so overwhelmed and hopeless, so utterly lost in despair, that dying seemed like the only possible way out.

* * *

Chapter 2

It was a quiet spot, at the end of a gravel road that petered out onto granite ledges within sound of the shore (although not quite within sight of it). No one came here at this time of year. The palatial “cottage” in the clearing wouldn’t be opened until school was out in far-off Washington DC, so that its owners’ children could come with their mother to spend the summer. Their father would commute, flying in to the Bangor Airport almost every weekend and finally staying here with his family for most of the month of August. But right now, in early May of 1967, the snow was gone at last—the sun had warmth in it—and this small space carved out of the spruce forest was vacant, and private, and safe.

“Safe” was how Janice Franklin always felt, when she could be alone with Tom Croft. She was uneasy at home, out of place at school, cast in the wrong role at church; but with Tommy, she could relax and be natural.

How long had they known each other, anyway? Since Pastor Franklin had brought his family to Starks Harbor twelve years earlier, which meant since just about the time that Jan’s memories began. She was four, and little Kevin just two, when the Franklins arrived from a village on the Atlantic coast of Nova Scotia to take over the pastorate of the Starks Harbor Community Church.

Starks Harbor. A lobster fishing town in mid-coast Maine, far to the north of the white sands of Old Orchard Beach but still miles to the south of Acadia National Park. A place of rocky shores and wind-battered spruce trees, that was big enough to be a small hospital’s home—to have its own tiny police department, and just barely enough stores so that the town possessed a “Main Street.” But it

wasn't populous enough to support more than one full-time ministerial family, so anyone who didn't like Jan's father's way of preaching the Gospel was obliged to get in the car and drive to Sparks Head or Bucksport or Ellsworth every Sunday.

The congregation wasn't affiliated with a denomination, but its most conservative members tended (naturally enough) to be more active and therefore more influential than did its moderate or liberal members. So whenever a new pastor was called to the Starks Harbor Community Church, he was more likely than not going to be someone like the Reverend William Franklin. Someone who believed firmly that his wife should mind the churchwomen's morals, that his daughter should never know what it was to wear trousers, and that his son should be the model of obedient behavior for every other boy in town.

Tom Croft's father was Pastor Franklin's head deacon. But Tom himself had never been accused of piety, so it was definitely against Pastor Franklin's rules for his daughter to be seen anywhere in Tom's company except at a school or church function among a group of other young people.

For them to be alone in this wonderfully private place was decidedly out of bounds. And what they'd just finished doing together, on a blanket spread over a bed of spring-damp moss, was so far outside of acceptable behavior that Jan sometimes lay alone in her parsonage bedroom and touched her own body in the places where Tommy had touched her-and could hardly make herself believe that her memories of their intimacy were accurate recollections, and not imaginings.

But she always knew they were real memories, of course. She could relive them at night because she'd recorded the smallest details of each tryst in her mind, enabling her to recreate its every moment. She was doing that right now, absorbing every sensation in order to remember it all clearly when she needed reassurance that this afternoon had really happened.

The sharp scent of spruce needles; the soft *slap-slap* of waves (and of the occasional almost-spent wake from a lobster boat) against the ledges and boulders along the shore, beyond the privacy screen of spruce trees. Warm spring sunshine streaming into the clearing where the cottage stood, and finding the two adolescents who lay gasping together on the dampened blanket. In spite of the moss, the ledge underneath it was hard-in spite of the sunshine, the air from off the ocean was sharp-and Jan was glad, now, to pull down her bra and button her blouse. To pull on serviceable underpants that had been stretched out by too many washings, and pull down her skirt to cover her thighs.

Tom liked to touch her breasts, that was the only reason for opening her blouse. He hadn't taken off much of anything. A man didn't have to, in order make love.

He was careful and considerate, and she loved him for that. When they'd discovered that the so-called "rubbers" he had gone to such trouble to obtain made intercourse painful for Jan, he had promised her to always pull out before the critical moment came so that no barrier would be needed. That had to be a hard thing for a man to do, she thought as she sat quite comfortably on the blanket-she wasn't sore at all, she was used to him now! But her Tommy always kept his word, and even though she had rather liked the feelings that she'd experienced the few times she had let him complete the act of love unprotected-it wasn't the kind of pleasure that could tempt her to risk pregnancy. Not while he was willing to protect her, anyway, although Jan wasn't sure what her answer would have been if he'd insisted on staying inside her to completion.

She liked lying down for him, there was no doubt about that. She liked his gentle touches, and the way those caresses made her nipples harden and the secret place between her legs tingle. She liked his kisses, and the heat and fullness of his body moving inside hers (at least, she liked that now that it no longer caused pain!). But she knew that whatever he felt had to be many times more powerful than the pleasure having him in her arms gave her, because although she sometimes found herself moaning softly under his touches she'd never once come close to crying out in the sharp way that he did when he found release.

But that was all right. Even though Jan's mother hadn't lived long enough to give her much notion of how physical relations between men and women should feel, a counselor at summer church camp-an elderly pastor's wife, who had a kind face and a gentle way of speaking-had gathered the girls who were old enough to need such information around her one afternoon, and had talked to them quietly and quite bluntly about what the changes in their growing bodies signified. And while she had said that a married woman who loved her husband should never fear intimacy, and that there would be many times when such sharing would be pleasant, it was far more necessary to men than it was to women and that sometimes it would seem like a nuisance to be tolerated. That was normal, that was all right. A man must be cared for, and a wife who was tired from tending a cranky baby didn't need to feel guilty if she found herself simply accommodating her husband's lovemaking instead of responding to it. There would be other times, times when she would want his touch again; and if she cared for him when he needed her, he would still be there later. While if she did not look after him...she would have no one except herself to blame, if he strayed.

Tom's little sister, Rachel, had been the youngest girl present for that grandmotherly talk. She had listened with eyes even wider than Jan's eyes were-Jan had been fourteen, and Rachel twelve. And the next summer, that talk hadn't

been on the curriculum for Teen Camp. Probably because Rachel's mother, the head deacon's wife, had sent her husband to Pastor Franklin just as soon as Rachel asked her first question based on the curiosity that little chat had aroused in the elder Croft daughter's always inquisitive mind.

Jan was thankful with all her soul that she, at least, had heard it. Because it had been more than just a gentle lecture on a wife's marital duties; the old lady had also provided her listeners with frank explanations of things that the school nurse hadn't told eleven-year-old Janice on the day her loins first bled. The pastor's wife had told the girls exactly what constituted the act of married love. And for the number of wide-eyed, sheltered ones among them who had never seen even a small brother's maleness uncovered, she described the masculine anatomy.

Which was probably what had so distressed Sister Croft, Jan thought now with a tiny smile. Not that the good deacon's wife needed to have been so upset! The way that the elderly pastor's consort had described a penis, and the way Tommy had looked to her the first time he opened his pants preparatory to taking her, had been two very different matters.

She'd almost fainted, at the realization he actually meant to push *that* inside her! But every human being she knew was the result of such an act, and disappointing Tommy had been unthinkable in any case-so she had gathered up her courage, had hidden her terror from him (although she couldn't keep it from tensing her loins, which made something that would probably have been painful anyway more so than it had to be), and had let him proceed.

She wasn't sorry. She hadn't been then, not even at the worst moment when she'd wondered if he was going to split her body apart. And she wasn't now, this first time since last fall that they'd been able to lie down on a blanket under the sky instead of contorting in the back seat of Tommy's old car.

Definitely, it was better when you had room enough to relax.

"Okay, pretty girl?" No one in Jan's life had ever called her things like that, until Tommy did. She still had no idea why he thought she was pretty, with her perfectly ordinary hazel eyes and sandy hair that never behaved itself-with her skinny legs, and straight-instead-of-rounded hips, and breasts that looked impossibly small compared to those that bounced on the chests of the Starks Harbor High School's cheerleaders. But she had learned to trust Tommy a long, long time before he had started making love to her, a long time before he had spoken his first endearment.

So she smiled at him, and she nodded. "I'm fine," she said softly, reaching up to smooth his hair back from his forehead. He was damp with perspiration, as was always the case this soon after he'd made love to her. "But I'm supposed to get the Lufkins' cottage cleaned this afternoon, so now I'd really better get to

work!”

“I ‘spose.” He captured her hand, and kissed its palm. Which made her shiver, and made her tingle all over again in all those interesting places that she never knew her body possessed unless she was with him (or was thinking about being with him). “I hate to make you walk back up the Big Hill, but...”

“But we’ve taken enough chances already today. You have to go now, Tommy.” He used endearments in speaking to her, but she had never yet been able to make herself utter a single one that was meant for him. She thought of him as “my love,” “my darling,” as everything a woman might conceivably call the man she cared for enough to give him every sacred thing that was hers to offer; but she had yet to speak such words to anyone.

And something about trying to say them for the first time, scared her far more than opening her legs for the first erect penis she’d ever seen had managed to do.

So instead of telling him in words that she loved him, she pulled his head down and kissed him tenderly. She’d learned how to do that well, very well indeed.

He pressed her against his chest and held her for a moment after the kiss ended. Then he stood up, and helped her to her feet.

He gathered up the damp blanket, and put it into the trunk. He turned the car around, and headed off up the road.

Jan smoothed the damp and wrinkled back of her skirt down, and hoped that as the fabric dried and as she worked inside the cottage those wrinkles would become no more noticeable than if she’d sat in classes all day. At least, she thought with a wry little grin, she and Tom hadn’t been dumb enough so that either would have to go home wearing grass stains!

The cottage’s power was on already, so all she had to do was throw the main switch in order to use the vacuum cleaner and anything else electrical she might need to perform her afternoon’s labors. She turned on the Lufkins’ television set, a devilish invention that most certainly had never been given welcome at Pastor Franklin’s home, and set the volume high enough to follow her as she moved from room to room.

American Bandstand. Kids dancing, musical instruments playing in rhythms that were (according to Daddy) straight out of the darkest jungles of Africa; voices singing lyrics in praise of feelings which definitely had nothing to do with love for Almighty God.

She felt far more guilty about this indulgence, than she ever had about making love with Tommy. After all, making love was something a Christian woman was certainly expected to do within her life’s normal course. Jan was just doing it sooner than she was supposed to, and with a man her father didn’t

like. But listening to the Lufkins' television, without their permission (although she suspected they would have been happy to give it) and against Daddy's known wishes?

She had no excuse, except that so few things in her life made her pulses quicken and her feet want to dance. And while of course she never had danced in the lascivious ways that those kids on the TV screen were dancing, and wasn't sure she would try to do so if she suddenly had a chance, she knew on some instinctive level that the *wanting* to dance was just as normal and natural as wanting to give her lover pleasure.

After all, didn't the Bible say that King David had danced before the Lord?

* * *

Chapter 3

Lord, what's wrong with my girl? William Franklin's thoughts made the words into a silent prayer.

It was such a difficult thing to raise children without their mother. And it was, of course, still more so with a girl-child who was fast growing into a woman.

She'd never been a talkative little person, his Janice. But during the weeks since her sixteenth birthday, living with her had become like living with a clam. She never opened up, not unless Bill pried at her; and then she was almost certain to spit in his eye (figuratively speaking).

Now that summer was moving toward its close, with August bringing the first cool nights to this community on the northeastern coastline, he was getting really worried about his Jan. Worried enough that letting her stay behind in Starks Harbor for the first time while he went forty miles inland, to Family Week at Brighton Falls Christian Campground, was a promise he wished he hadn't made. But he would have to go, of course; he'd made promises to his fellow clergymen, and his congregation expected their pastor to lead the annual pilgrimage of Starks Harbor's religious conservatives to that startlingly Southern Baptist-style event.

The reason Janice didn't want to go to even one week of camp this year was her commitment to doing housework for a dozen different summer families, who were keeping her so busy that she was hardly ever at home with her father and brother. Young Kevin had had to be reminded, more than once, that most of the cooking and all of the cleaning and laundry at the parsonage were his sister's

responsibilities-that a man didn't do those things while there was a woman or older girl available-and Jan had had to be reminded, also more than once, that taking care of her own family was her first obligation. It was all right if she didn't fix every single meal, but she had to realize that the dishes would be waiting for her afterward if she chose to be gone all day. Kevin mustn't develop the habit of doing his sister's work for her, and Jan mustn't think she could expect her brother (or someday, her husband) to waste time on housekeeping. Getting Kevin out the door to work at jobs that were proper for an adolescent boy was hard enough, without letting him use "helping" his sister as an excuse!

But still, she was tired to an extent that just shouldn't have been the case with a healthy girl of sixteen. And being snappy wasn't like Janice, even though Bill Franklin realized that at her age she was entitled to have a crabby day or two each month.

She hadn't been near a doctor's office since her high school entrance physical. It was past time the girl had a full going-over, and ever since his wife had died in the local hospital Bill Franklin had had his doubts about the quality of health care in Starks Harbor.

About its quality, and its confidentiality as well. And it was an awful thing for a male parent to notice about a teen-aged girl, but the bathroom waste can had contained discreet evidence of her monthlies for several years now; and this summer, that had stopped happening.

He wasn't about to ask her what was going on. Nor was he about to take her to their family doctor's office and have the nurse who chaperoned all the pelvic exams tell her husband if the Franklin girl had a problem-after which the nurse's husband would tell his brother, who would tell his own wife-who was one of Jan's teachers.

And onward it would go, "the news" of Starks Harbor! And there was never any news half as interesting, of course, as that generated by the local pastor's family.

For twelve years now, Bill Franklin had managed to avoid being the subject of any serious gossip. If driving Jan to a doctor two hours away in Bangor would help to keep things that way, then he was more than willing to make the trip.

"Jan! Are you ready?" She didn't know they had a definite appointment to keep. He'd told her they would be shopping for her school clothes, and that wasn't a lie because afterward they could do that.

She looked so much like her mother, with that dark blonde hair framing her thin face and with those gold-flecked hazel eyes that hid so much more than they would ever reveal. She was taller already than Kelly had been, she took that from Bill himself; but otherwise she was Kelly's image.

And Bill Franklin loved his daughter, with a fierce protective love that was many times more intense than his attachment to his adolescent son. Although Kevin resembled him so decidedly that even if he'd had cause to doubt his wife's faithfulness (which he hadn't!), Bill could never have pretended Kevin wasn't of his own siring—he sometimes looked at the boy, shook his head in disgust, and wondered where he'd got such a worthless offspring.

At least Jan knew how to work, and wasn't afraid to do so. But getting Kevin to mow a few lawns this summer had taken a major application of his father's hand, and Bill didn't doubt that at Teen Camp right now his boy was probably sitting on the sidelines of some game and pretending to be hurt or sick so that he wouldn't have to exert himself.

Heaven forbid, that anyone should ask Kevin Franklin to break out in a sweat.

Laziness. It was one of the worst of the Biblical sins, since it was so closely tied to ingratitude for the blessing of good health; and it was also the worst character flaw that a young man growing up in Starks Harbor, Maine, could possess. Better that Kevin should set cats on fire for fun and blacken his as yet nonexistent girlfriend's eyes, as far as Bill Franklin's congregation was concerned, than that he should be uninterested in taking on a day's work and doing it with all his strength.

"Jan! Are you ready?" Having to ask her that twice was something new.

She came down the stairs, and her face was pasty. Her hair, which last night had been newly washed, was stringy with sweat. She said, "Daddy, I'm not sure I'm going to be able to ride all the way to Bangor without getting sick again."

"So bring a bucket with you. We're going." As he always did when he was frightened, Bill Franklin spoke roughly. He didn't do that with the people in his congregation, of course; but he'd always done it with Kelly, and he always seemed to do it with Jan and with Kevin.

Kelly had understood her husband, though. The kids didn't understand their father. Jan was looking at him with enormous, baffled eyes, and she was nodding and coming the rest of the way down the stairs with the hopeless air of a kicked puppy.

But for her own good, he had to do this. She looked far too much the way that Kelly had looked, years earlier when Jan had been an unborn baby.

Oh, that couldn't be it! The girl didn't even have a boyfriend!

But whatever it was, it had to be corrected. To see his beautiful daughter looking the way she did this morning, was more than Bill Franklin's heart could stand.

* * *

The doctor's office smelled of antiseptics, and of other things that Jan didn't particularly want to identify. She sat shivering on the edge of the examining table, wearing nothing but a skimpy gown, and she answered the nurse's clipped questions truthfully-except for the ones that were none of the woman's business.

Not that the nurse was unpleasant. She was of what Jan regarded as middle age (thirty at least), she was neither pretty nor homely but just as ordinary as most of Jan's female teachers, and she was businesslike rather than overtly inquisitive.

She was just doing her job. But although Jan admitted easily enough to the starting date of her most recent period, her intimacy with Tommy was something she wasn't going to talk about no matter who tried to make her.

The doctor wouldn't be able to tell. Surely that was just an old wives' tale, that a physician could determine at a glance whether or not a woman was a virgin. And although her cycle was out of whack because she'd been feeling so upset and so miserable lately, that didn't mean she could be pregnant.

Tommy had protected her. He'd pulled out before the critical moment came, every single time.

The doctor didn't come in until she was already lying flat on her back, with her knees bent and spread far apart and (unimaginable humiliation!) with a large spotlight directed at the part of her body that she'd always been taught to keep most private. She could feel the blasted thing's warmth on her skin, which might have been a pleasant counter to the coldness of both room and examining table if she'd been alone here.

But she wasn't. The doctor peeped at her over her sheet-draped knees, informed her of his last name, and called her by her first name. Which he mispronounced. She was "Jan-is," phonetically speaking, and he called her "Jen-esee."

That was the only time he spoke to her. The nurse immediately started asking him questions about another patient's treatment, which he answered while he put first his gloved fingers and then hard, cold instruments inside Jan's body. The worst moment came when someone else on the medical office's staff rapped perfunctorily at the exam room's door, and then opened that door (how far, Jan could not see)-relayed a phone message to the doctor, listened to his answer-and then went away at last, leaving Jan to close her eyes tightly against disbelieving tears.

Finally he stripped off his gloves and left her alone with the nurse again. By the time she was dressed, and sitting in one guest chair in the doctor's office while her father sat tight-lipped in the other, this man whose face she'd only glimpsed earlier was the last person in the universe whom she wanted to meet properly.

He shook her father's hand, as soon as he came in and just before he retreated behind his massive wooden desk. This office was as large and bright and airy, as the examining room had been small and dark and dank. Jan could see, now, that the physician was of about her father's age-that he wasn't bad looking, that if she'd seen him on the street without knowing a thing about him she might have thought him "distinguished"-and that he didn't like her.

On the examining table she'd been nothing but a body, of so little importance that he'd chatted with the nurse about someone else while he was looking at her and touching her in ways no one except Tommy had ever looked at her before or touched her before. She wasn't even worth a few minutes of his undivided attention. But now he looked right into her eyes, and he asked sharply by way of greeting: "Jen-eese, why did you lie to me about having had sex? I don't need to see your lab work to know that you're pregnant. You're a good three months along, and you can't tell me you didn't know it."

I couldn't have lied to you about anything, because you didn't let me say a word until now! Jan thought, as she made herself stare back. It was difficult to do, but she'd learned somewhere along the line that sometimes if she just stared at church ladies who were asking her too many personal questions those ladies would back off.

It didn't work with this Doctor Connelly. Instead, it made him angry. His face flushed, and after a moment's silence he turned to his patient's father. He asked, "Bill, what do you want me to do for you from here? She's got to have prenatal care, that's even more important when the mother-to-be's under eighteen. But you're not going to want me to take her on as one of my regular OB patients, are you?"

"I don't know what to do, Bob." The use of the doctor's given name settled it; this was, indeed, one of Bill Franklin's old friends. From high school? Or from the secular college he'd attended before his conversion?

It didn't matter. What did matter, was what the doctor said next. With compassion in his eyes; but it was compassion directed entirely toward Jan's father, and not at all toward Jan herself.

"Bill-I know you probably don't believe in abortion, and it's illegal in Maine anyway. But it's not illegal everywhere, and there's time. Just barely; she's not quite beyond the safety window. Is that a possibility?"

"No. It's not." Franklin shook his head in vehement emphasis.

"Then either you've got to get her married-or you'll need a place for her to stay until after the baby's born and signed over to an adoption agency." Still the doctor didn't even look at Jan. He was through with her, that was clear.

And that made her angry. Jan sat up straight in her chair, stuck out her chin, and said firmly and rather loudly: "Daddy, I *want* to get married. We were

going to, anyway! This is just sooner than we thought we'd do it, that's all."

"We? Who's 'we,' Janice?" Bill Franklin turned toward his child, and she thought that his voice somehow emphasized the proper way to pronounce her name.

Sometimes she thought there was more going on in Daddy's mind than his words by themselves made apparent. She hoped, she desperately hoped, that this was going to be the time that would prove her theory.

"Tom Croft and me," she said. And then she was silent, while she watched as the hope that had been in her father's eyes died swiftly.

"Oh, no!" Bill Franklin's voice came out as a groan.

"Problem, Bill?" Dr. Connelly raised an eyebrow.

"Yes. Big problem." Franklin sighed. "The boy's father is my head deacon; it's a good family. But Tom's the next best thing to a heathen, Bob, and there's no way in this world I'm going to turn my daughter over to him for the rest of her life."

"Daddy, I'm not a puppy. Tommy wants to marry me, not adopt me!" Jan couldn't believe she'd said those words, but when she saw the looks on the faces of two respectable middle-aged men she knew she really had.

Oh, Lord. She'd done it now. And she was going to make it worse, because now that she'd opened her mouth she couldn't seem to close it and keep it closed.

"I love Tommy, and he loves me!" she rushed on, her breath coming quickly and her pulse pounding so that she could feel it in her temples. "There's nothing I want more in the whole world, than to marry him and have his baby! And he does love me, and he'll want to take care of me. Of us. I know he only goes to church because his father makes him, but he's a good person. You don't really know him, Daddy! But I do!"

"I guess you must know him, all right." Bill Franklin's face had lost its momentary softness. His shoulders were bracing, and his chin was lifting in just the way that Jan's had when she had dared to defy him a few minutes earlier. "Jan, you don't know what you want. You're just too young to be making decisions about the rest of your life, or about the life of that child you're going to have six months from now. You're not marrying Tommy Croft. That's all there is to it. Now," and he turned away from his daughter, and back toward the impatiently waiting doctor (who no doubt must be getting behind still further, in a schedule that Jan Franklin had already disrupted for the day). "Bob, do you know of somewhere I can send her? I can't pay much. I wish I could, but I can't."

"Where I've got in mind, you won't have to pay a thing. The adoptive parents will pay for everything. The mother's room and board at the maternity

home, her medical care, the delivery. If you can come up with transportation to get her to New York, preferably by air so that you won't have to go with her yourself or hire an escort to make sure she gets there without running, that's all you'll have to pay for. That, and any collect phone calls you want to let her make." Dr. Connelly smiled now. Even at Jan, as if things were going his way at last.

As if he'd won a battle in which she was his adversary; although how that could be, she had no idea at all.

* * *

It was as if Dr. Connelly's staff had done this many times before, Jan thought as she lay in bed (in a cot, actually) in an enormous old house on a Bangor street that she hadn't recognized when her father had brought her here and left her. There had been no question of allowing her to go home with Daddy, to get her clothes or her hair curlers or anything else that belonged to her; and when she'd protested that she needed those things, the woman who'd been filling out forms in the house's entrance hall had looked up from her work and had said in a voice that (oddly enough) didn't sound unkind, "But, child, those clothes won't fit you a few weeks from now, anyway."

Bill Franklin had answered gruffly, "She'll need them for awhile, though. I'll be back tomorrow before her flight leaves, and I'll bring her things. I want to put her on the plane myself."

"I want to talk to Tommy," Jan whispered, and clung to her father's arm when he turned to leave her. "Doesn't he have a right to know about his baby, Daddy?"

"No. He doesn't!" It had been exactly the wrong thing to say. Franklin's face hardened, and he deliberately disengaged his daughter's grasp. "Jan, don't you understand? He's done something terrible to you. I'm trying to help, and I'd appreciate it if you'd stop fighting me about it!"

"It's not something terrible. It's being in love, and having a baby." The tears that she'd fought back ever since those horrible, humiliating minutes on the examining table threatened to burst out at last. But Jan managed to contain them one more time, while she watched her father shake his head in disgust and then walk away and leave her.

She saved them for the solitude of this tiny, cell-like room, with its chamber pot under the bed because the door was locked to make sure she couldn't find her way to a telephone. Alone now, scared and bewildered, she let herself cry at last.

Finally she slept, and woke to horrendous morning sickness and that still-

locked door keeping her from a decent way to relieve it.

* * *

That was an apt introduction to her new life, vomiting helplessly and then being scolded for having fouled the floor because she couldn't stand the idea of throwing up over the chamber pot. She was watched while she showered and dressed, watched by a bored young woman who told her cheerfully (the scolder had been an elderly cleaning lady) that she was the first "transient" they'd had at St. Vincent's Home for Unwed Mothers in quite some time. A transient, Jan learned when she asked, was a pregnant girl whose family was sending her to a similar home out of state.

"So that there's no chance anyone who knows you will run into you, you know!" the young-guard? Matron? Social worker? Whatever she was!-said, still cheerfully. "And to make it a lot harder for you to run away, of course, since no one in Noo Yawk City's going to know you and want to help you. But you're a smart girl, you won't try anything like that. You'll behave yourself. You'll go to the school at the Home there, and you'll do what your doctor tells you. And then you'll have your baby, and it'll be as if none of this ever happened to you. You'll go home to your dad, you'll forget all about it, and somewhere a couple who couldn't have their own child will give your baby a better life than you could ever have given it."

How can you know that? Jan wondered silently. How can you know what kind of a home Tommy and I could give our baby? He's almost eighteen, and his father has more money than anyone else in Starks Harbor. If I can just get through to him, if I can just mail him a letter or make a phone call to his house! As soon as he knows, he'll come and get me. Daddy won't be able to stop him. No one will!

But she was wrier today than she had been yesterday, and besides-this chatty female didn't call forth her anger in the way that both Dr. Connelly and her father had. This woman wasn't condemning her. She was only doing a job, and in the meantime she was treating Jan as well as she knew how to treat her.

Which started, definitely, by talking to her as one human being to another. Matter-of-factly, as if (as was certainly the case) Jan's predicament was neither a new one nor an extraordinary one.

Just something to be got through as well as was possible, and then put into the past. Which was exactly what Jan meant to do, of course! But not in quite the way that her guardian of the morning thought she should do it...because she was going to get word to Tommy. No matter what Daddy thought, her lover did have a right to know about his own child; and, knowing, he would do the right

thing.

Whether or not anyone else liked it, Tommy would come and get her and then he would take care of her. They would get married somehow; and six months from now, she and Tommy and their baby would be a family.

* * *

~~ Order your [paperback](#) or [ebook](#) to day! ~~