

JANICE
LYNN

The Doctor's
Meant-To-Be
Marriage



Janice Lynn

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«HarperCollins»

Lynn J.

The Doctor's Meant-To-Be Marriage / J. Lynn — «HarperCollins»,

Chelsea Majors met sexy Jared Floyd when they shared one fleeting but oh-so-memorable kiss ten years ago—the kiss that made her feel beautiful for the very first time. Now Dr. Majors has come to join Jared Floyd's practice, and discovers that although Dr. Floyd is just as smoldering as ever, there's a sadness in his eyes....Chelsea brings life and sparkle to the surgery—and everyone can see the smile start to return to Jared's chiseled face. As Chelsea and Jared gradually find their way back to one another, Jared begins to realize that this might be his last chance to make Chelsea his bride.

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God, she'd missed him—hadn't realized just how much until this moment. She wanted to wrap her arms around him and tell him how rarely a day went by that she didn't think of him, and that never before had just seeing someone caused so much mayhem to her mind and body.

The whole package appealed to her, drew her in: the spark that flickered through her when his warm fingers clasped hers; the heat in his eyes when their gazes met; the way she'd instantly wanted him with an intensity she'd never experienced before or since that spring break they'd met.

She sighed, reminding herself that the first day on her new job wasn't the time or the place to be fantasizing about the hunky doctor who'd haunted her heart for the past ten years. Or to be rehashing all the reasons why that particular fantasy wouldn't ever come true.

Dear Reader,

I love to hear how couples first met, how they fell in love. How, oftentimes, fate kept them apart, but they somehow managed to find their way back to each other despite the odds. Sigh. I am ever the romantic, and reunion stories just tug at my heart and make me teary-eyed.

When Chelsea Majors met Jared Floyd, she knew. Deep in her heart, she knew that he was everything she wanted. But life was complicated— isn't it always?—and they weren't meant to be. Now, years later, fate brings them together again, and sparks fly. This time Chelsea is determined to heal Jared's broken heart, and in the process, teach him that love is worth fighting for.

As with many of my stories, I fell in love with the characters. Jared is such a tortured soul, and Chelsea is someone I just had to pray got her man. Sigh. Did I mention that reunion stories get me every time?

I love to hear from readers. Please e-mail me at Janice@janicelynn.net to let me know what you think of Jared and Chelsea's story or just to chat about romance. You can also visit me at www.janicelynn.net to find out my latest news.

Happy reading!

Janice

The Doctor's Meant-To-Be Marriage
Janice Lynn



THE DOCTOR'S MEANT-TO-BE MARRIAGE

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CHAPTER ONE

DR CHELSEA MAJORS pulled on her lab coat and prepared to bask in the first day of the rest of her life.

OK, so maybe she was being overly dramatic, but she'd worked a long time to get to this particular morning. Today she started work at Madison Medical Center, a family clinic that employed three physicians. Make that, as of today, four.

She'd never considered going anywhere other than the moderate-sized practice near Alabama's Gulf Shore coast where her brother worked. From the time of her birth Will had practically raised her. Certainly, she'd spent a lot more time in his care than her parents'.

Henry and Iva Majors had had lives to save, extended overseas mission trips to go on, and medical boards to run. Dealing with their youngest child had been left to hired help. Chelsea had preferred the care of her nanny to her often times indifferent parents anyway. Will had been another story. He'd been the perfect son while Chelsea had been an accident from the moment of conception. Her mother had had no qualms at pointing out that due to her difficult pregnancy she'd had to miss out on an important mission trip to Bosnia.

Plus, she was pretty sure her parents had decided a mistake had been made at the hospital and they'd been given the wrong child. Who could blame them when they were such overachievers? Her father, her mother, her brother. Everyone but her.

For too many years she'd been stuck inside her defective body and an outcast within her own home. Will had been able to go with their parents on their overseas trips, to live their lives. Chelsea's medical problems had kept her at home, in the care of others, and somewhere along the line she and her parents had missed forming loving bonds.

But with Will's encouragement and her own determination, she'd come past all that and achieved her lifelong dream of becoming a family physician. She wanted to make a difference in others' lives the way a few good doctors had in hers. Not by serving on some politically connected health board or by going overseas, but to make a difference in a small-town community that would likely never earn her any commendations from the president. Her parents already had enough of those hanging on the wall.

"You ready, sis?" a tall, dark-haired male version of herself asked. Will stepped into the closet-sized room she couldn't be more proud of—her office—and tossed a small package to her.

"What's this?" Examining the gold foil and white silk ribbon, she held up the square gift-wrapped box. She met her brother's twinkling brown eyes, so similar to her own. Her heart pinched at his thoughtfulness. Although seven years her senior, they'd always been close and she admitted to hero-worshipping him for as long as she could remember. Will had been her hero, making her believe in herself when it would have been too easy to shut the world out.

"Just a little something to let you know how proud I am of my kid sister," he said, prowling through the cardboard box on her desk. He lifted a small, stuffed bear in doctor garb, curled his nose, then dropped the fuzzy animal back into the box. "I thought we got your stuff moved in on Saturday?"

The bear had been a gift from a group of undergrad friends in celebration of when she'd gotten her acceptance letter to medical school. She cherished the gift, just as she cherished the friendships. Having been homeschooled with very little interaction with others until her teens, she never took for granted the blessing of having friends.

"Almost everything." She glanced at the bookshelf with her precious medical books lined up in neat rows. Nodding toward the box, she said, "This is personal stuff to give the room my personality."

Will's handsome face wrinkled in a look of thorough disgust. "You're going to make this room all girly," he teased.

She rolled her eyes and finished unwrapping his gift. Her eyes misted at what she saw nestled in the tissue paper.

“Oh, Will. You shouldn’t have.” She wrapped her arms around him and gave an appreciative squeeze. “Have I told you lately that you’re my favorite brother?”

“I’m your only brother,” he reminded her, indulgently hugging her with a pleased grin on his face. “Give it here so I can pin it on your lab coat.”

She handed him the name tag he’d had made for her, one printed with her name and the name of the practice. He pinned the tag to her white lab coat and studied her appearance, much as he’d done many times throughout her childhood.

The badge was a cheap piece of plastic, but the love behind the gift was priceless. Will knew how hard she’d worked, how she’d longed for this day.

Not all the reasons she’d longed for it, of course.

Because her brother didn’t know about the passionate kiss she’d shared with Jared ten years ago.

Neither did Will know how excited she was at the fact his partner was going to be a daily part of her life.

The truth was, though, she also dreaded seeing Jared, of having to constantly face the man who haunted her dreams when she knew she could never have him. When her ex’s rejection had left her emotionally doubled over, she could only imagine what seeing the disgust in Jared’s eyes, hearing him say she was unlovable would do to her poor heart. No, she wouldn’t open herself up to the kind of pain Jared had the power to deliver. Never again. She’d offered her heart to him on a platter and he’d turned her away, asked another woman to marry him, driving the message home that she hadn’t been good enough.

Oblivious to her thoughts of the past, Will straightened the name tag, and shook his head slightly. A look of pride shone in his golden brown eyes. “There, you look perfect.”

Reminding herself of all she’d accomplished, of the life she’d forged for herself, Chelsea bit back an ironic laugh. Perfect? If only.

Dr Jared Floyd read over Connie Black’s MRI report, not liking the radiologist’s comments. He’d hoped arthritis had been causing her worsening hip pain, but according to the report a tumor was growing in the sixty-year-old woman’s left hip joint.

Which meant he had to deliver the bad news at Connie’s appointment in the morning. Damn.

Connie had come so far from three years ago when he’d first diagnosed her lung cancer. She’d quit smoking, survived the removal of one of her right lung lobes, endured chemotherapy and radiation, and suffered through the loss of her husband three months ago to a massive heart attack. She’d endured everything and kept a positive outlook. Now this.

He stared at the report, hoping the wording would change.

Highly suspicious mass with solid consistency and increased vascularization. Biopsy recommended.

Maybe the radiologist was wrong.

Maybe he was doing a lot of wishful thinking.

And definitely a whole lot of procrastinating.

Sighing, he left the report on his desk and went to examine his patients. Normally, he cleared up lab and radiology reports before starting his appointments and usually he finished quickly. Today, he’d tarried.

Partially due to Connie’s bad MRI report, but also because of the clinic’s newest employee.

Chelsea. He’d avoided seeing her since the night he’d made the biggest mistake of his life. Not an easy task when she was his best friend’s little sister. Today his avoidance would come to a screeching halt because, with Chelsea joining the practice, he’d see her more days than not.

How could he remain faithful to Laura's memory if he was constantly confronted with the woman who'd made him second-guess his heart?

Knowing he had to get the inevitable over with, he headed to her office just in time to hear Will's teasing.

"Now," Chelsea's brother said, "go see your patients before I have to fire you for slacking on the job. Nepotism will get you nowhere around here."

Yeah, right. Will babied his kid sister and wouldn't even consider Chelsea going to work elsewhere when Jared, risking his friend's anger, had voiced his concerns. Family and business didn't mix. Too bad Will had ignored Jared's less than subtle hints.

"Oh," Chelsea said as she rounded the corner of her office doorway, bumping into him. Surprised golden brown eyes lifted, met his and she gave a sharp, surprised gasp. "Jared."

Reflexively, he grasped her arms to steady her and was struck by a hauntingly familiar waft of something sweet, like homemade cookies or vanilla. Whatever the fragrance, the inviting smell filled him with the desire to take a deep breath. Just as the thought of knowing only the cotton fabric of her lab coat separated their skins filled him with the memory of the single kiss they'd shared and how he'd run his hands over her bare arms that night.

She'd been so beautiful, so full of life, so innocent. Yet the sparks between them had been anything but when she'd caught him off guard by pressing her body to his. By pressing her lips to his.

Even now he recalled the warmth of her lips, the moan that had escaped her mouth when he'd kissed her back, the softness of her flesh when he'd molded her to him.

God, he hadn't been able to get close enough, hadn't been able to stop himself from kissing her even though he'd known it had been wrong. He'd have sold his soul that night to have made love to Chelsea.

And although he'd gotten his body under control before they'd done much more than kiss, he hadn't walked away with his soul intact. Far from it.

No, kissing Chelsea had cost him a great deal, too much.

Which he didn't need to be thinking of because some things were best forgotten.

Not that he'd been able to forget, despite years of trying.

Some things truly were unforgettable.

"Jared," she repeated, her gaze traveling over him, almost as if she couldn't resist seeing how time had changed him. Her honey-colored gaze softened, almost becoming a caress, stroking his insides to an ooey-gooey mess. Red stained her cheeks when her eyes lifted to his and she realized what she'd done. "It's been a long time."

His heart thudded against his chest in a rapid beat and his bones turned to jelly, leaving him off-kilter. Had he secretly wondered what Chelsea would think of him after all this time? Of how she'd perceive the changes the years had etched on him?

Annoyed at her stirring of his senses and thoughts, he frowned. How could he want to lean in and get a better smell of a woman he didn't even want to like?

"Yes, it has." Too long. Not long enough. "I was on my way to say hello," he said matter-of-factly to cover his slip.

She smiled, flashing perfect white teeth. Her mouth made him think of his favorite female actress, of her classic, infectious smile. Wide, bright, and contagious. Despite his determination to remain impassive, outwardly at least, her smile made his lips want to curve upward.

Which only served to annoy him all the more.

Although she was older than the too-young-for-him seventeen she'd been when they'd first met, there were a thousand reasons why he needed to stay away from Chelsea and safeguard himself from getting close to her. Even if she did now work at Madison Medical Center.

Chelsea held out her hand. She had nice hands with slender fingers and clean, unpainted nails.

Unable to avoid the greeting, Jared clasped the hand of the girl who'd become a woman in the years since he'd last seen her.

Warm. Electric.

His blood sizzled and fried his brain, short-circuiting the logic that said he shouldn't think Chelsea's soft touch so compelling, her smell so mesmerizing, her nearness so seductive. Time hadn't changed the way she heated his blood. Unfortunately.

He let go of her hand, wondering why he wanted to turn her hand over and run his fingers over her palm. Ridiculous. He wasn't a romantic and even if he had been, Chelsea would be the last person on his list of possible valentines. She held the power to destroy everything he held dear.

Their gazes met and desire flickered in her eyes. Desire he'd last seen right before she'd kissed him ten years ago.

At seventeen she'd affected his libido more than any other woman before or since. She'd also left him feeling guiltier than at any other point in his life.

Foolish as the notion was, he'd thought avoiding her would protect him.

He'd learned the hard way not to tempt fate and Chelsea tempted in too many ways.

"Ahem." Will cleared his throat from behind his sister.

First shooting Jared a dazzling smile, Chelsea scowled at her brother. "Hold your 'taters."

"My 'taters, huh?" Will laughed, giving his sister a conspiratorial wink. "That's a new name for them. But if you insist on my holding them..."

"Eww." She rolled her eyes. "Keep your nastiness to yourself, please." Seeming glad of the interruption, she sighed with great exaggeration. "Do you have a brother, Jared?" she asked. "Because, if not, you're welcome to mine."

"Hey, what happened to being your favorite brother?" Will asked, pretending to be hurt.

"Like you said, you're my only brother. Which means you're also my least favorite." Obviously relaxed in her brother's presence, she grinned mischievously. "Now, quit pestering me at work. I've got patients to see."

With that she paused long enough to bestow another uncertain glance on Jared, swished her ponytail with a great deal of sass at her brother, and headed toward the exam rooms.

"Isn't she something?" Will asked with obvious indulgence.

Not sure how he was supposed to answer, Jared opted for watching Chelsea pause outside the first exam room. Why did she hesitate? Had their reunion left her as shaken as he found himself? Was she recalling how their mouths had felt against each other, how she'd moaned, parted her lips beneath his, granting him sweet surrender?

He winced. Her reasons didn't matter because Jared planned to keep his distance. No matter that he found himself wanting to lean in and inhale her seductive scent, to know if she still tasted heavenly, to know everything there was to discover.

He turned and found Will watching him with narrowed eyes.

"She's off-limits."

Jared snorted. Despite the way he'd once again responded to Chelsea, he didn't need this particular warning. "It's not like that."

"Uh-uh." Will didn't look convinced. He pulled him inside Chelsea's small office. "You're one of my partners and best friends." Will's eyes lost the good-natured humor that usually shone there, replaced by a steel Jared had never seen in his pal's gaze. "But my sister is not your type."

Recall of the electricity that had short-circuited his brain reminded him that physically Chelsea was exactly his type, but he kept his mouth shut. He was above acting on physical attraction when that attraction came in the form of something so bad for him.

"No problem." He spoke slowly, keeping his voice level. "Because I don't date coworkers anyway."

Particularly one who was his partner's baby sister and would turn his life totally upside down if he wasn't careful.

He'd already been through that scenario once and didn't care for an encore.

CHAPTER TWO

CHELSEA paused outside the exam room door and closed her eyes, welcoming Jared's image into her mind.

The deep blue of his eyes stirred her memory. They were just as she remembered them, as blue as the Caribbean Sea and caressing her soul as if she splashed in their seductive depths.

In stark contrast to his eyes was the midnight inkiness of his hair, hair that promised silky smoothness beneath her fingertips. She'd itched to reach out and touch a strand, to see if his hair was really as soft as she recalled. His cheekbones were high, his chin strong with a tiny cleft in the center. Jared's slightly crooked nose added character, making her think he'd probably broken it as a mischievous little boy.

God, she'd missed him, hadn't realized just how much until this moment. She wanted to wrap her arms around him and tell him how rarely a day went by that she didn't think of him, and that never had just seeing someone caused so much chaos to her mind and body.

But her attraction to Jared ran much deeper than the surface. For all his good looks, she'd met more handsome men and not felt the flutters still dancing in her belly.

The whole package appealed, drew her in.

The way he smelled spicy clean. The spark that flickered through her when his warm fingers clasped hers. The heat in his eyes when their gazes met. The way she'd instantly wanted him with an intensity she'd never experienced before or since that spring break they'd met.

She'd looked at him and seen her future.

She'd seen...

Chelsea! Get a grip. Her hot thoughts meant allowing someone to see the Chelsea she kept carefully hidden away from the world, and that's something she'd only done once. The result hadn't been pretty, and she never wanted to bare her scars again.

Yet, realistically, she knew that to marry and have children, which she hoped to do someday, she'd eventually have to trust someone to see the real her.

She sighed, reminding herself the first day on her new job wasn't the time or the place to be fantasizing about the hunky doctor who'd haunted her heart for ten years. Or to be rehashing all the reasons why that particular fantasy wouldn't ever come true.

Taking a steadying breath, she knocked on the door and entered the exam room.

With tachycardia, bulging eyes, and rapid weight loss, her first patient probably suffered from hyperthyroidism. After giving him a complete examination she gave a lab slip to the nurse and asked him to schedule a follow-up appointment for a few days hence.

Chelsea washed her hands and went to the next patient room to read the chart notation.

Five patients later, and feeling good about her morning, she stood outside an exam room, reviewing the nurse's note. Hannah Belew. Sixteen. Wants to go on oral contraceptive.

"Hi, Hannah."

The petite young woman on the exam table didn't appear to be in her teens, much less like she should be asking for birth control. However, Chelsea refrained from pointing out her observation as the girl already looked like her hackles were up.

"The nurse's note says you'd like to discuss birth control. I'll need to ask some questions so you and I can decide together which birth-control option is the most appropriate for you."

"OK," the girl said with a pink tinge to her cheeks. She didn't meet Chelsea's gaze.

"Have you ever had a pelvic examination before?"

Mouth agape, the girl shook her head. "No way."

"Are you sexually active?"

She hesitated, giving Chelsea her answer.

“You won’t tell my mom any of this? Patient confidentiality and all that, right?”

A sticky question if ever there was one.

“I’m not obligated to tell as long as you’re not threatening your life or someone else’s.”

“I have a boyfriend,” Hannah admitted, apparently satisfied with Chelsea’s response. The young girl shrugged her shoulders. “He likes sex.”

“Do you?” Chelsea asked the obvious question, catching the teenager off guard.

“Like sex?” Hannah averted her eyes and took a moment before answering. “I like my boyfriend.”

Apparently Chelsea wasn’t the only one who could answer with diplomacy.

“Hannah, if your boyfriend really cares about you, he’d like you regardless of whether or not you agree to have sex.”

Regardless of whether or not long scars marred your back.

Kevin hadn’t, and Chelsea often wondered if the scars from his rejection ran deeper than those of the surgeons who’d operated on her scoliosis.

Then again, Jared had also rejected her, without having seen the imperfections of her body. But she’d understood, even respected his determination to do the right thing as she’d been underage.

Hannah didn’t speak, but Chelsea could feel walls being thrown up. The young girl didn’t want to hear what needed to be said.

“At your age,” Chelsea continued, “abstinence is most often the wisest choice, but, regardless, sex is an important step in a relationship. Both parties should be ready for that step and should enjoy making that step when the time arrives.”

“He didn’t force me,” Hannah said pointedly.

“Perhaps you were ready for that step,” Chelsea continued gently, “but perhaps you weren’t and only went along with what your boyfriend wanted because you were afraid of losing him.”

Hannah’s lower lip disappeared into her mouth and the girl squirmed on the exam table, crinkling the protective paper covering the vinyl top.

“It’s my job to help you take care of your health. That means your mental and emotional health as well as your physical.”

“I’m not sick,” Hannah insisted. “I just want to go on the Pill so I won’t get pregnant.”

“Even if you go on the Pill, you still need to make your boyfriend wear a condom. The only way to protect yourself from sexually transmitted diseases is to abstain or have your partner wear a condom.”

“Or to have sex with a virgin,” Hannah added with a touch of irritation. “I know all this already. We went over this stuff during health class when I was in junior high school.” She eyed Chelsea suspiciously. “You’re going to tell my mom, aren’t you?”

“No, but I recommend you tell her.”

“Me tell her? You have got to be kidding me.” The girl snorted, her expression dramatic. “I thought you said your job was to look out for my health, not to get me killed.”

“Your mom wouldn’t kill you.”

“Maybe not,” Hannah admitted. “But she wouldn’t let me see Brett anymore, and that’s worse than dying.”

Having fallen hard for Jared at only a year older than Hannah, Chelsea wouldn’t judge the girl. Neither would she point out that her entire life was ahead of her, whether Brett remained in her life or not.

“Whether or not you tell your mother is your choice. My job is to give you the best information I can so you can make wise health-care decisions. In this case, having an open discussion with your mother is what I believe to be best.”

Ha, like she’d ever had an open discussion with her own mother. These days, she and Iva only saw each other a couple of times a year. Thank God, as she didn’t think she could survive more. Only

through Will did Chelsea find contact with her parents tolerable. Sometimes she wondered if they would even include her in family activities if not for her brother.

What right did she have to advise Hannah to tell her mother? What if Hannah's mother made Iva look warm and cuddly?

"It's your call," she said softly. "But I want you to at least consider talking with her."

"Sure." Sarcasm never dripped as thickly as it did off Hannah's flippant tongue.

Chelsea took a deep breath. She didn't seem to be getting through to the teenager.

"OK, let's move on. We'll discuss the different birth-control options you have."

Hannah's gaze narrowed. "What kind of options?"

"Pill, patch, shot, cervical cap, intra-uterine device, all of which require a pelvic examination first."

The girl cringed. "You have to see me down there?"

"To do the thin prep test that checks your cervical and vaginal cells, I have to physically examine you."

The girl's face fell. "I don't think I can do that."

"Have a pelvic exam?" Chelsea clarified, wanting to make sure she understood what Hannah was saying.

The girl nodded. "Just the thought embarrasses me and makes my skin feel hot and sweaty."

"You have to have the test before I will write you any type of prescription birth control."

Hannah let out a long sigh. "Why?"

"Some tumors grow at an accelerated rate when hormones are added."

Hannah rolled her eyes. "I don't need hormones. I just want the Pill so I don't get pregnant."

"Many types of birth control are hormones, including the Pill."

"Oh." The girl sat quietly, digesting what Chelsea had told her.

"Another thing you should consider having is the HPV vaccine."

The girl crossed her arms and gave Chelsea a smug look. "I've had all my vaccines."

"That's wonderful, and perhaps you have had HPV, too, but it isn't a required vaccine so not everyone has. The vaccine is recommended for girls aged nine through twenty-six. HPV, or human papillomavirus, is the most common sexually transmitted disease in the United States and causes most cases of cervical cancer."

Hannah's eyes became round. "There's an STD that causes cancer?"

"Yes." Chelsea was glad to see she'd caught the girl's interest. "There are around fifty strands of the virus. The vaccine protects against the strands causing cervical cancer."

"If this HDP is so common, why haven't I ever heard of it?"

"HPV, and you probably have heard of the disease without knowing it. Genital warts are also caused by human papillomavirus," she explained.

Hannah's nose curled in disgust, and she nodded. "I do remember studying those during health class. Nasty business."

"Let me give you some information to read." Feeling pleased she'd made a connection with the girl, Chelsea stood. "I'll come back in a few minutes, and you can decide what you'd like to do regarding your pelvic examination and the vaccine."

She stepped into the hallway and didn't see Betty anywhere. Scanning the nurses' station, she wondered where brochures and handouts might be kept but didn't see anywhere obvious.

"Problems?" a deep voice asked from behind her. A voice belonging to the man she'd had to force off her mind all morning. Her spirits lifted just at knowing he was near, that he still felt the connection between them and had sought an excuse to search her out, to share a conversation. Perhaps he was a man confident enough to overlook her imperfections and care for her just as she was. Hey, a girl could dream.

She turned, but her heart stalled.

Jared's eyes would have formed glaciers on the sun. Ouch. Why was he looking at her like that? With something akin to...Chelsea sought the right word and could only come up with loathing.

But he couldn't loathe her. All she'd done had been to ineptly flirt with him ten years ago. OK, she'd kissed him, too, but he'd kissed her back, so surely he didn't blame that completely on her?

Jared had left the next day and, despite initially trying to contact him, she'd not seen him since.

Not knowing how she'd clung to his words, Will had updated her from time to time. Jared wasn't married and, other than the longtime girlfriend she hadn't known about when they'd first met, there hadn't been anyone special in his life. Laura. She'd suffered at the name, mourned at the existence of the woman who had held Jared's heart, but she'd never wished the girl's fate on her. Later that same year Laura had been killed in a car accident.

Jared was Will's best friend. He wouldn't hold a grudge for ten years over something as simple as her foolishly throwing herself at him. Would he?

Wishing she didn't feel like she carried the bubonic plague, she gave a slight smile. "I was looking for a handout on the HPV vaccine and hoping we had one that explains pelvic examinations."

Without any softening of his features he pointed to the small lab where basic phlebotomy tests were performed. "In those two filing cabinets."

She nodded, expecting him to walk away, but instead he opened a drawer and pulled out a sheet on the vaccination.

"We keep folders here with all immunization information in them. I don't recall seeing a handout explaining what to expect during a pelvic examination, but if there is one, it would be in here." He flipped through another drawer.

Chelsea stared at the back of his dark head, wishing she could read his thoughts.

"Nothing," he said, closing the drawer and facing her. "You can probably pull something up online when you get time and mail it to your patient."

Good idea, except she didn't think Hannah would be receptive to getting mail at home regarding the reasons for her office visit. Although she'd verbally gone over what would take place, she wanted Hannah to have something concrete that explained exactly what would happen during the exam.

"Or I have a patient-education program on my computer. It might have something."

"Really?"

"We could check..." He hesitated and she wondered if he regretted his words even before they'd completely left his lips.

"If it wouldn't be a bother."

He didn't meet her eyes. "No bother."

Chelsea followed him to his office, surprised he'd offered when he seemed so antagonistic toward her. Perhaps he was afraid she was going to throw herself at him like she'd done all those years ago. She wouldn't, of course. Sure, being near him gave her those same throw-caution-to-the-wind urges, but she'd matured, gained some experience with the opposite sex. She wouldn't make a fool of herself again.

Jared stood beside his desk and clicked his computer mouse, bringing up the home screen. Chelsea used the moment to glance around his office.

Plain, uncomplicated, and to the point. No personal items other than the award and acknowledgment certificates framed on the wall. Already her office had more of her than this room reflected of its owner.

Then again, maybe he liked keeping things simple and the minimalist look worked for him.

"I've got a couple of different programs, but if we can't find what you need, the Internet is sure to have something."

Chelsea's gaze returned to him, going over the lean lines of his body. Time had been good to Jared. Too good. If possible, she thought he was even more handsome now than he'd been ten years ago, but there was something different, something missing from his eyes. The happy twinkle she'd

grown to love that spring break. Instead, Jared's eyes only shone with a deep inner sadness that she suspected many failed to see.

"I appreciate this," she said, swallowing the lump in her throat. She had to stop thinking of Jared as a martyr or as a pinup poster. Just because he looked like a brooding pinup model, it didn't give her the right to keep mentally ogling him. Wasn't that what women were known to complain about happening to them? Personally, Chelsea could go for a little visual ogling from time to time, just to boost her battered ego, but she digressed.

Jared was her colleague, her coworker, and her brother's best friend. For her to embarrass them both by throwing herself at him again would just be wrong. Plus, her attraction to him would make their professional relationship strained. She'd worked too hard to get her degree, to have the career she dreamed of, to let misplaced hormones rob her future.

"Ah." He glanced over his shoulder to indicate she should check out what he'd pulled up on his computer monitor. "This what you're looking for?"

Chelsea skimmed the form. "Perfect."

He clicked the mouse again, and the page shot out of his printer. "Here. If you run across something else you need and can't find it, let me know. Patient education is important."

"Yes." She took the offered printout and glanced at it without really seeing the diagrams and words. "Thank you, Jared."

"You're welcome." An awkward moment passed where they stared at each other, not speaking, just locking gazes. He looked away, swiped his palms over his pants, then closed the computer program. "Got to get back to my patients."

"Right."

They both stepped out into the hallway.

"Oh, there you are!" Leslie, a bubbly nurse practitioner who worked in the clinic, saw Chelsea and bounded up to give her a quick hug. "Sorry I missed you this morning." Her gaze swerved for a second. "I got a late start, but no matter. I've been hoping to catch sight of you all morning." She flashed a smile at Jared. "You, too, actually."

Jared's brow rose, but he didn't comment.

"Will, Jennifer and I want the entire office to go out tonight for dinner to celebrate Chelsea's first day."

Chelsea opened her mouth to say she'd love to, but was frozen in place by Jared's arctic attitude. She inwardly sighed.

"I'm busy," he said.

Fighting frostbite, Chelsea tried not to let his words hurt her. It wasn't as if she'd really expected him to want to have a relationship with her. Sure, she'd dreamed, but in reality even her dreams had only been private fantasies. Even to have a fling with Jared meant baring her soul, her back. Letting someone as beautiful as Jared see her marred flesh was not going to happen.

"Busy?" Leslie's gaze narrowed as she eyed him curiously. "Jennifer is on call for the hospital, but amazingly the rest of us have the evening off. We won't get a better opportunity than this evening for us all to get together, and you know it."

Chelsea could almost see Jared's brain whirling, trying to get out of the dinner. Did he plan to avoid her as much as possible?

He'd managed quite well over the past ten years and hadn't been there on any of the occasions when she'd visited her brother. He'd even gone out of the country for six weeks during the time she had been officially hired.

"Come on, Jared," Leslie coaxed. "No flavor of the month is more important than business."

Flavor of the month? Heat rushed into Chelsea's cheeks and her fingers gripped the printout she held so tightly the edges crinkled.

The coolness of his gaze covered her skin in goose bumps.

She didn't understand his strange reaction, but refused to slump into negativity or pity. She didn't do either. Hadn't for a long, long time.

He crossed his arms and glared. "Go without me. I'll swing by when I can. Just let me know what restaurant you decide on."

Chelsea didn't believe him. And not just because he talked through gritted teeth. What was his problem?

"Hey, Jare," Will said, rounding the corner with a chart in hand and his nurse closely on his tail. "Leslie fill you in on tonight's plans? We've got to officially celebrate my little sis's induction to the paying workforce."

Leslie's gaze cut to Will and a pretty pink tinted her cheeks, making Chelsea wonder which of the men caused her blush. "I was just telling him, but Jared says he has other plans."

"Cancel." Will shrugged nonchalantly at his friend. "You're going with us tonight."

Chelsea had had enough of feeling like the scraggy puppy in the pet-shop window.

"I'm fine with whatever you decide, but I need to get back to my patient." She waved the printout as if that explained everything and walked away before she went into total embarrassed meltdown. Later, when alone with her thoughts, she'd try to figure out why Jared had acted so oddly. If it was because he thought she was going to make his work environment unpleasant by mooning over him, she'd set him straight.

She'd gotten quite good at keeping her emotions hidden.

Chelsea gave the printout to Hannah for her to look over while she saw another patient. When she'd finished, she returned to Hannah's exam room, but the girl was gone.

"Betty?" She went in search of the nurse. Spotting the pretty, slightly overweight forty-year-old, she asked, "Is Hannah in the restroom?"

Blowing a stray short, dyed-platinum strand of hair out of her eye, Betty gave Chelsea a confused look. "She left."

"Left?"

Betty nodded. "Right after you came out of the exam room, she took off. I thought you'd finished."

Glancing into the room, Chelsea saw the counter and trash bin were both empty. Well, at least Hannah had taken the brochures.

CHAPTER THREE

WHAT had he agreed to?

Nothing. He hadn't agreed, and no way was he going to dinner with Chelsea. Not even with his partners there as buffers. He'd been right to avoid her and should stick with that plan as much as current circumstances allowed.

But for the rest of the day Jared's mind kept drifting back to how his skin had tingled when they'd touched, how her smile gave glimpses of lightheartedness, how his body perked up at her nearness.

But he shouldn't do anything to encourage thoughts that there could ever be anything between them. There couldn't. Attraction between him and Chelsea was the last thing he needed. His life in Madison was good, exactly what he wanted. It had taken him a long time to find happiness after Laura's death and he wouldn't risk losing that hard-won inner peace.

Not peace, really, he had too much guilt for that, would always have too much guilt over what had happened to Laura, but he'd come to terms of a sort with what had happened.

He'd done the right thing, focused on his relationship with Laura when she'd told him she was pregnant the week after she'd returned from Greece. The week after he'd met Chelsea.

Laura had known something had changed, that he hadn't been the same after spring break. She'd pushed, she'd prodded, she'd begged him to tell her if he wanted her to have an abortion. He hadn't, but neither had he been able to admit that he'd fallen for a seventeen-year-old girl. He'd pushed thoughts of Chelsea aside, had asked Laura to marry him, and had committed himself to being a good husband and father.

She'd been ecstatic, until she'd overheard a conversation not meant for her ears. A conversation when his buddies Larry and Tom had ragged him about Chelsea and the way she hero-worshipped him. Jared had snapped, telling them to shut up, but it had been too late. Laura had seen the truth on his face, and they'd argued.

Although not in the way she'd wanted, he had loved Laura and would have done everything in his power to make her happy, would have been a good husband and father.

He'd never gotten the opportunity.

That night, she'd swerved off the rode, hit a tree, and lost their baby and her life.

Guilt had held him captive ever since.

Guilt that said he didn't deserve happiness, particularly not with Chelsea.

"Dr Jared?" interrupted his nurse, Kayla Welker. He'd hired Kayla the month he'd started at the clinic and he'd never had cause to regret his decision.

He blinked, clearing the past from his mind. For the moment, at least. "Yes?"

"Sorry to bother you, but I just put Anthony Rogle in room two. He's wheezing. Do you want me to give him a breathing treatment, or would you like to check him first?"

"I'll see Tony first. Go ahead and set up the nebulizer, though. No doubt, he'll need it." Jared followed Kayla to the exam room where the pale twenty-one-year-old struggled to catch his breath, wheezing audibly. A beautiful girl sat next to him, holding his hand and whispering assurances.

"Thank goodness, Dr Jared." The young woman sighed her relief. "Tony is having another attack."

"Hey, Emily." Jared motioned for Kayla to start the machine as soon as she got the apparatus set up. He listened to Tony's heaving chest. "Any triggering factors this time?"

Emily shook her head. "We were at work, and his chest started heaving. He used his inhaler, but his breathing didn't get better so I drove him here. Doc, why has he started having these attacks? They scare the devil out of me!"

“Quit...talking...about me...like I’m not here,” the thin, pale young man ordered, giving his girlfriend an irritated look as he panted for air.

Kayla handed Tony the breathing apparatus, and he began inhaling the albuterol solution via the nebulizer. The noise of the machine droned through the otherwise silent room. When Tony gave the thumbs-up sign that his wheezing was starting to ease, Jared turned to Emily and Kayla.

“Keep an eye on him. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Two months ago Tony had suffered his first asthma attack. He’d had no prior history of problems. His episodes occurred mostly at work, but he’d had a few at home and one at his girlfriend’s family home.

His hand-held inhalers helped on occasion, but more and more Tony’s attacks weren’t eased without a trip into the office or the emergency room. More often than not, getting his attack under control required a steroid injection along with the nebulizer treatment. Jared tried to avoid the steroid shot if possible because of the potential side effects. Hopefully as Tony could already feel some relief, using the nebulizer, no injection would be needed today.

What was causing the young man’s attacks?

Developing asthma at twenty-one wasn’t a common phenomenon. They’d gone through Tony’s risk factors, and although he worked in the paint shop of a boat factory he always wore proper ventilation masks. There had been no new products or changes in the home and he didn’t have a pet. There were no recent illnesses and once the attack passed, Tony felt fine except for being tired, a frequent symptom following an asthma attack.

Jared saw his next patient, a schoolteacher needing a refill on her anxiety medication. When he’d finished, he knocked on Tony’s door. The nebulizer no longer hummed, meaning the treatment had finished.

“How’s the breathing?”

“Much better, Doc,” Tony answered, talking without sounding winded. Emily still sat, squeezing his hand and watching him nervously, like she expected his chest to heave again any moment. All that Jared had expected to see. What he hadn’t expected to see was Chelsea smiling at his patients, chatting with them while she packed up the nebulizer. What was she doing and where was Kayla?

Chelsea’s golden brown gaze met his and for a moment he felt as if she searched his soul, seeking answers to questions he couldn’t acknowledge. But then she slid on a professional façade, picked up the machine, and gave a tight smile.

“Kayla had some business to take care of, and I was between patients,” she said by way of explanation. Without glancing his way again, she pushed past him in the small room. Her shoulder brushed against his, making his nerve endings pulse to life. Her scent filled his nostrils, making him feel as if he was struggling for his next breath every bit as much as Tony had prior to his treatment.

When she closed the door behind her, he sucked in air, hoping to ease his oxygen-deprived brain cells, or whatever was making him feel so dizzy.

He turned to Tony and Emily. “What happened?”

“I was on break and all of a sudden I couldn’t catch my breath. I felt like an elephant was sitting on my chest.” Tony placed his hand over his sternum. “Like I needed to rip my rib cage open so air could get into my lungs.”

How he’d just felt with Chelsea near.

He winced at the thought and focused on his patient. “You used your inhaler?”

Tony nodded. “I even took more puffs than I’m supposed to, but I just couldn’t catch my breath. I should probably take my nebulizer with me to work.”

“Are you using your nebulizer often?”

“I’ve used it some,” the young man admitted. “But since you started me on that asthma tablet I’ve only had to use the machine twice.”

“You’re using the inhaled steroid, too?”

“Just like you told me.”

“You haven’t thought of anything that’s changed within the past two months?”

“Same house, same car, same job, same girlfriend.” Tony shot Emily a teasing glance. “I could replace her and see if she’s the problem.”

She slapped his arm. “Then you really wouldn’t be able to breathe because I’d strangle you.”

The tender kiss she placed on his cheek and the worried way she watched each breath he took told another story.

Tony winked. “See what kind of abuse I have to put up with, Doc?”

“I see.” Jared smiled at the couple, wondering if he’d ever been that young. He had, of course. He’d foolishly thought he’d been in love and had destroyed much of his life. Destroyed Laura’s life. “I’m going to keep you here a while longer just to make sure you’re over the attack. I’ll have Kayla check on you in a few and if things are OK, we’ll let you go home. I’m going to go ahead and set you up to see a pulmonologist, though. That’s a lung specialist. Maybe he can figure out what’s causing these attacks.”

Jared planned to do more research that night to see if he could unravel any clues about why Tony had suddenly started having his attacks.

Although, recalling his dinner plans, his research might be later than he intended.

Darn Will and Leslie for putting him on the spot like that. There’d been no way for him to continue to refuse without raising their suspicions. He didn’t want to deal with questions about why he didn’t want to go, why he didn’t want to be around Chelsea.

He’d call and cancel because being near Chelsea definitely caused him breathing problems.

Chelsea brushed her hand over the clean lines of her cherry-wood desk. She glanced approvingly at the gleaming surface, smiling at how her first day had gone.

Other than Hannah Belew, all the patients had seemed to accept her and be pleased with their care. Chelsea was holding out hope that Hannah would schedule her pelvic examination and vaccination. Maybe the girl would decide to go to the local health department. Or decide not to have sex anymore.

And Jared, well, she just didn’t know what to think about his odd reaction. She’d always wondered what he’d say, what he’d do when their paths crossed again. She hadn’t expected the coldness. Not really. Maybe a few awkward moments until he realized she wasn’t going to launch herself at him, but then he’d laugh and treat her with the same fondness he had that spring.

Only Jared was different in that regard. He looked like he rarely laughed these days. Had Laura’s death robbed him of that inner joy Chelsea had found so charismatic?

“What are you looking so contrite about?” Will asked, poking his head into her office.

“Come in,” she said, motioning for him to have a seat. “I was just reflecting on the day.”

“And?”

She smiled. “Overall, things went well.”

“Overall?”

Her smile faded. She really needed to be careful about what she said to her brother. She didn’t want to give him cause for worry where Jared was concerned. Not when there would never be anything between them anyway. “I had a patient leave before I finished.”

He looked taken aback. “Someone left in the middle of your examination?”

“No,” she clarified, shaking her head. “I stepped out to give a young girl a moment to think about getting a pelvic examination. When I came back to the room, she’d disappeared.”

Will’s confusion melted away to mild amusement. “I don’t blame her. I’d run too if you tried to put me in stirrups.”

Chelsea tossed her ink-pen cap at him. “You’re not helping.”

Grinning, he caught the plastic cap. “Apparently she wasn’t ready for a pelvic. What’s the problem?”

“She’s sexually active. She came in to get a prescription for birth control. What if she ends up pregnant because she ran out instead of finishing her exam?”

“Then her pregnancy would be her fault. Not yours.”

“But I should have—”

Will put up his hand. “Did you explain the reasons why she needed a pelvic exam?”

“Yes, but—”

“No buts. I’m sure you did a great job. The rest is up to the patient. You can’t force people to make the right decisions for their health, Chels.”

Talking to her brother could be like talking to a brick wall. Particularly as he was brilliant and usually made great sense.

“I know, but—”

“I already told you, no buts.” Smirking, he winked. “Although I understand why you keep bringing mine up since it’s so dashing.”

“Your butt is dashing?” She gave a sisterly eye roll. “I swear I’d think you were insane if I didn’t know how intelligent you really are.”

“Thanks, sis.” He leaned back, glanced around the office. His gaze lingered on the items she’d unpacked from her box, which included several photos of the two of them and friends. When his gaze returned to hers, his seriousness surprised her. “Was today everything you thought your first day would be?”

Not sure what had caused his mood to change, she nodded. “It was much more.”

Because she’d seen Jared, touched Jared, refreshed her memory of just how powerfully he affected her mind and body. No, that was crazy. Jared was not why she was in Madison.

Will’s brow lifted. “More?”

“Today wasn’t much different than any other day for the past couple of years.” After all, she’d been seeing patients for quite some time during her residency. “Yet because I was at a real job, with my own office and name tag...” she touched the gift he’d given her that morning “...today was magical.”

Apparently pleased with her answer, Will nodded. “Good. You deserve magical. You ready to go out to celebrate?”

Chelsea glanced down at her spic-and-span desk. “I suppose. Is Jared going?”

She could have kicked herself for the slipup. No way should she be asking her brother about Jared. She’d always been subtle when she’d asked about him in the past, but there’d been nothing subtle about her blunt, heartfelt question just then.

“Said he was. Why?”

Under the intensity of her brother’s stare, she fought the urge to blush. Something told her Will wouldn’t be happy if she said that at seventeen she’d taken one look at Jared and had fallen for him hook, line, and sinker and today she’d discovered those feelings for him to be just as strong.

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t keep her gaze locked on her brother’s. “No reason other than I wondered who was going.”

Her brother wasn’t buying any of it. She didn’t have to be looking into his eyes to know that.

“Sis.” Will sounded resigned. “This isn’t a good idea.”

“What isn’t a good idea?” She arched a brow and stared straight into his eyes.

“Jared.”

“What about Jared?”

“I don’t want you getting any ideas about him. He’s not right for you.” If it had been anyone other than Will talking she’d think they meant she wasn’t good enough, but it was her brother. Will never thought any man was good enough for her. Certainly, he’d never liked Kevin.

“No worries, then, because my only interest in Jared is business.” She hated lying, but she didn’t want interference when there wasn’t anything between her and Jared except memories of a passionate kiss and a brief heated look that morning that had quickly transformed into icicles.

“Just you make sure to keep it that way.” Will’s gaze flickered, causing suspicion to flare.

“Tell me something, Will. Why is it that I’ve not once seen Jared in the past ten years? Not even when I was interviewed for this job?”

“He was out of the country, doing mission work.”

“I know he was on a mission trip and Jennifer wants to take off to go stay with her mother following her hip-replacement surgery, but don’t you think it’s a little odd that I’ve not seen Jared since that spring we all came down here?”

Will crossed his arms and took on a stubborn look. “Not really, although I hadn’t really thought about it. Is there any particular reason why you would have wanted to see him?”

Knowing she was revealing too much by questioning her brother, she shook her head. “No reason.”

She got ready to leave for their dinner, but Will lingered.

“Look, sis, you should know that Jared...” He glanced around the room as if he’d find whatever word he searched for. “Well, he’s got a bit of a reputation.”

Ah, here came another brotherly warning. She’d known she’d said too much. “A reputation?”

“As a ladies’ man.”

She could remind her brother about his own reputation, but opted to hold her tongue, especially as she hadn’t seen much to warrant that reputation since she’d moved to Madison. “And?”

“You shouldn’t get any thoughts about him.”

“Thoughts?” She blinked innocently, although she knew exactly what he meant.

“Non-professional ones, because in the long run you’d end up getting hurt. He’s never gotten over Laura.”

Chelsea sighed with great exaggeration. “This is unnecessary, Will. I’m going to dinner with all the providers I work with, including you. Not on a date with Jared.”

“Yes, but you’re a beautiful woman and he’s...” An irritated look came over his face.

“He’s what?” she prompted, trying not to let her brother’s offhand compliment sidetrack her from the real issue.

“Not blind,” he ground out.

“Are you saying you think Jared might find me attractive?”

God, she hoped so. How pathetic was that when, even if he did, a relationship between them would never work?

“Not if he wants to live.” Will smacked his fist into the palm of his other hand with emphasis.

Enough of the theatrics. She couldn’t have her brother going all macho on his best friend. “Will,” she said softly, “there’s nothing for you to be concerned about.”

“I’ll be concerned when you’re eighty when someone as jaded as Jared is involved.”

She met her brother’s stern expression and resisted the urge to hug him for loving her so much.

Will raked his fingers through his dark hair. “Don’t get me wrong. He’s my friend, a brilliant doctor, and we’re lucky to have him, but he goes through women like a proctologist goes through rubber gloves.”

“Eww.” Chelsea scowled at her brother’s analogy. “Bad comparison.”

“But true.” His jaw tightened. “Jared has only had one use for women since Laura died. I saw how you looked at him this morning, and I don’t want to see you hurt, Chels.”

He’d seen that look? No wonder he was issuing warnings.

“Will...” She sought the right words to tell her brother how much she loved and appreciated him, but wanted him to butt out when it came to her love life. Or lack of one, in this instance. “I’m

twenty-eight years old and can decide for myself whether or not someone is worth the risk of getting hurt. Believe it or not, I'm not totally inexperienced," she said.

"Give me a name." Will's teeth gritted, his fists clenched at his sides, and she believed he really would go and fight for her honor.

Chelsea laughed. She couldn't help herself. Will's outrage was so adorable. "You can't go around bloodying every guy who finds me attractive."

"Wanna bet?"

She snickered in a very unlady-like way. "Lighten up. I'd like to marry and have kids someday."

Jared's babies. She closed her eyes and pictured blue-eyed, black-haired imps who called her mommy. Oh, what a fantasy.

"Just so long as you don't actually want Jared."

Had he read her mind?

"Even discounting the little-sister factor," he continued, "which is huge by the way, think how difficult a crash and burn between the two of you would make things at the office."

A nervous flutter gurgled in her belly, but she refused to acknowledge the warning. She gave him a smile meant to be light, but her attempt came out as forced. "I guess it's a good thing we're only going out for dinner as a group of coworkers, then."

"You're making fun of this, but I'm serious, Chels. Jared is a good guy, but Laura's death messed up his head. He's not been close to anyone since."

After ten years of carrying Jared in her heart and knowing she'd never have him, Will's warning fell flat.

Picking up her purse, she gave her brother a bright smile. "I'm going to dinner with my new coworkers. No big deal. Coming?"

After all, there was no reason for Will to get so worked up when, other than that brief moment this morning, Jared had looked as if he'd rather have his nails ripped off than have to spend five minutes in her company.

The recall of the cold look he'd given her earlier sent shivers racing down her spine. What had happened to cause his expression to go from burning hot to freezing cold?

Then she knew.

Will must have seen Jared's look, too, felt the sparks, and done what he'd just attempted to do with her.

Only Jared would have seen Will's warning as a sign that Chelsea was still interested in him, that she still wanted him.

He probably really was afraid she was going to corner him and jump his bones. Great.

No wonder he'd gone from hot to cold.

CHAPTER FOUR

AT THE restaurant, a cell phone buzzed and, after taking a call from the emergency room, Jennifer reluctantly excused herself from the group. Chelsea sat next to Will, opposite Jared, and Leslie between the two men.

She'd caught Jared looking at her several times while they'd waited for their table and after they'd been seated, but he always averted his gaze and distracted himself with conversation with Will.

Chelsea wanted to beat her head against the wall. Did he really think that after ten years she was going to doggedly pursue him? She'd barely pursued him after that wonderful week they'd met.

For ten years regrets had haunted her for allowing Jared to push her away so easily. Of course, a few weeks later the girlfriend Chelsea hadn't known about had died. She'd tried contacting him, wanting him to know she felt his pain, that she would be there for him if he needed anything, that she'd turn eighteen in another week. She'd wanted him to know she missed him.

It had taken all her nerve to sneak into Will's things and find Jared's number, to dial it, and leave her message of condolence and ask him, please, to call her.

He hadn't called and that had spoken volumes. Heartbroken at yet again being rejected by someone whose love she'd craved, she'd resolved to focus on the things in her life that she had had control of. Like her medical career.

Besides, she was no longer a teenage girl with a crush. No, the heaviness clutching at her chest wasn't a teenage crush. But she daren't give a name to how Jared made her feel. How he'd always made her feel.

If whatever Will said to him was why he'd gone so cold on her she had to set the record straight, to let him know that she didn't expect anything more from him than friendship. Wanted, yes, expected, no.

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