



Love's Healing Path (Wagon Train Matches #6)

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Category: Historical

Description: Maddie Fairfax may be young, but on this Oregon-bound wagon train, the pioneers welcome help from the self-trained nurse. Until Dr. Jason Goodwin joins up with their company. The doctor portrays a frosty exterior, but Maddie may be the only one who sees the profound loneliness that haunts him.

After losing his wife and children in a terrible accident, Jason has vowed not to open his heart again. But when Maddie takes on the care of three young orphans, Jason finds himself entangled in the lives of the makeshift family. And as their journey west continues, Maddie's radiant compassion begins to light up the darkest corners of his heart.

Until the unthinkable happens. Will Jason's guarded heart and Maddie's untamed spirit pull them apart? Tropes/themes: *May/December*ready-made family / adopted orphans*grumpy/sunshine*love on the journey*emotional scars

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Maddie Fairfax exited Mrs. Barrigan's tent without looking where she was going. Head bent, one hand rifled through the wicker basket she held.

She sensed someone hovering nearby, a little behind her and a few feet from the Barrigans' tent. That wasn't unusual. Since the first week she and her sisters had begun traveling with this Oregon-bound wagon train, folks had sought her out when they needed help.

She wasn't anything special. Not a nurse, not officially. But she'd learned about herbs and home remedies from a dear neighbor, Mrs. Murphy, when growing up in Dublin. When her father had been sleeping off the drink, when her older sister, Stella, had gone to work in the factory, Maddie and Lily had needed someone to watch over them. Maddie had needed someone to nurture her love of learning. Keep her from drowning in loneliness.

Mrs. Murphy had done that for her.

She was still rifling through the basket—where was that yarrow?—but she heard the crunch of footsteps on the dry prairie grass behind her.

"Excuse me."

She stopped, surprised at the cultured male voice. Her fingers closed around the sprig of yarrow as he stepped closer to her elbow. "I've been hoping to meet you," he said. "I understand you've?—"

Her bonnet slipped back slightly as she glanced up. And up. My, he was tall. Piercing

brown eyes studied her. She recognized him immediately—the man who'd accompanied Owen Mason and his wife, Rachel, when they'd returned to the wagon train days ago.

A doctor, she'd overheard during a late meal one evening.

He was striking, with a patrician nose and strong jawline with only a hint of stubble. Dark hair peeked from beneath his hat.

His eyes took her in just as she was doing with him. His nostrils flared wide and his lips firmed in disdain.

She knew that look. Seán had worn the very same one on the night he'd told her he 'hadn't ever loved her. Not really'. He'd broken her heart.

She couldn't help the minute narrowing of her eyes. What right did this man have to look at her so? To dismiss her before she'd even spoken to him?

He cleared his throat, expression shuttering. "I'm Dr. Jason Goodwin. Folks call me Doc. I thought it was time we met."

Jason.

For a moment, time grew sluggish. Or maybe that was the beat of her heart in her ears.

She smiled tightly. "Maddie Fairfax."

She stuck out her hand, offering a polite handshake even though he still looked as if she were a bug that had landed in his supper.

It took a beat too long for him to reach out and take her hand, a flush high on his cheeks. He barely touched her before he dropped her hand like a burning coal.

She didn't understand this instant dislike. She had a very good bedside manner. It made her bristle.

He jerked his thumb toward the tent she'd vacated moments ago. "Perhaps I should examine the patient."

"Why?" she asked warily.

"I've heard good reports about how helpful you've been to the company thus far..."

She didn't smile. Simply waited.

"But I'm a doctor by profession."

Surely he didn't mean the words to offend.

Her eyes cut to the tent and back to his tight-lipped expression. She could give him the benefit of the doubt, couldn't she? She shuffled closer so that she could lower her voice. This wagon train was full of gossips. No need to give them any fodder.

"Mrs. Barrigan asked for me. As you said, I've formed a rapport with the travelers in this company. They know me."

She hadn't meant to deliver the last so that the words sounded like a challenge, but as his shoulders grew more tense under his dark suit coat, she allowed her chin to jut up.

His eyes flashed. "And where did you gain your medical degree?" Now his words threw a gauntlet. "A woman's college? Apprenticing with a professional doctor?"

Uncertainty slithered through her. A voice from the past, one that sounded like Seán's, whispering, you're a child. You don't understand how the world works.

"Ah. You don't have one." His superior tone irritated like a burr rubbing against bare skin. "I'm sure you mean well, Miss, but I've seen firsthand how home remedies and old wives tales can do more harm than good. The trail itself is dangerous enough."

So this was it.

The source of his disdain. He thought she was beneath him because he had a medical degree—and likely years of experience, based on the brushes of silver at his temples.

But wasn't there value in what both of them could provide? She opened her mouth to ask whether they couldn't work together, both helping the travelers, when he spoke over her.

"Mrs. Mason almost died from an infection," he informed her in a know-it-all tone. "She would've died had it not been for my medicine." He patted the black bag in his left hand as if it were a chest full of gold, not medical supplies.

Mrs. Mason's husband, Owen, was tangentially related to Maddie's brother-in-law, Stella's husband, Collin. Owen was Leo's half brother, Leo was Collin's half brother. The Spencer and Mason families were tight-knit because of Stella's connection. Maddie was often in close proximity to them as well. She'd seen how pale Rachel had been when she and Owen had returned to camp. Had witnessed how quickly her energy flagged even now. Part of that could be attributed to being the mother of a newborn, but Maddie had also heard from her friend Alice Spencer about how near a thing it'd been, Rachel almost dying from infection.

Before she could say anything else, a young voice rang out.

"Miss Maddie, Miss Maddie!"

Happy for the interruption, Maddie moved toward Alex Miller, who was running toward her. Alex was all of ten years old and related to one of her former patients—sort of. She would be happy to leave this conversation with the doctor behind.

Unfortunately, Jason was right on her heels as Alex reached them. The boy bent over, hands on his knees, as he tried to catch his breath.

Maddie knelt at his side, one hand going to his shoulder. "What's the matter?"

"Tommy's stitches came loose."

Tears streamed down the boy's cheeks as the words tumbled out. He wiped his face with one grubby hand, smearing dirt through the moisture.

Maddie had stitched up a small cut on the dog's leg just yesterday. She'd cautioned Alex and his brother Paul to keep the dog barricaded inside their wagon or tied up so his movement would be restricted—but the small brown dog was incredibly energetic, and she wasn't surprised he'd torn open the stitches already.

She started to comfort Alex when Jason interrupted her again.

"Where is this patient?" Doc demanded.

The boy sniffled and glanced from Maddie to Jason.

Jason kept his eyes averted from her. It had been on the tip of her tongue to tell him that this patient was a dog—except his disdain rolled over her again like a wave. He seemed to think the situation dire—did she really need to correct him? Perhaps she

could let this play out...

No. Her concern for the boy and his emotions had her putting her hand on his shoulder. "It's all right, Alex."

"He's in our wagon." Alex pointed across the clearing. "Miss Maddie, ya gotta stitch him back up."

Of course she would.

Jason bent to speak to the boy. "I think it would be prudent if I went with you and put in the stitches."

Alex looked tearfully up at him, suspicion evident. "Who're you?"

"This is Doc," Maddie said gently. "He's got a fancy medical degree from back East."

He bristled. Had he heard the slight condescension that had leaked into her tone?

The doctor's smile turned into a grimace. "I've performed countless surgeries and assisted in many more. I'm certain I can put in stitches that will stay closed for your patient." Spoken as if Maddie's stitches had been inferior.

Her lips wanted to twitch. Perhaps he wouldn't argue quite so hard if he knew the patient was a canine. She straightened and motioned Doc across the clearing. "By all means."

The boy looked between them, though his eyes had taken on a new shine. "You're a real doctor?"

"I am," Jason confirmed.

"C'mon!"

Alex left at a jog. Jason followed. Maddie trailed behind both of them.

"I'm certain I won't need assistance," he called out over his shoulder, not even deigning to look her direction.

But she trailed the pair anyway. If Jason became angry at being deceived, she didn't want that to boil over onto Alex. And someone would need to stitch up the dog. If Jason refused, she'd happily do the task.

Alex climbed into the wagon. "You better wait there, Doc. Ma doesn't like anyone tracking mud in our wagon."

Jason started to protest, but Maddie stayed him with a hand on his forearm.

He jerked away from her. "If you please."

She felt the punch of hurt before she blanked her expression. She'd reached out without thinking. What possessed her to stop him in that way?

But surely he didn't have to react like that.

The doctor set his bag on the ground and opened it, ignoring her completely.

What she'd thought was simple contempt for her lack of education must be more. Perhaps there was something about her that had rubbed him the wrong way. It didn't matter. Shouldn't.

But that didn't stop the misty haze from slipping over her eyes. She blinked it away, firming her lips into a line.

She'd make sure Alex and Tommy were taken care of, and then stay out of the doctor's way. With such a big company, surely she wouldn't have to speak to him again.

Alex edged out of the wagon and dropped to the ground with a small brown dog in his arms and sidled up to the man.

"This is Tommy. He don't like strangers much."

The little dog growled at Doc, baring its teeth.

"This." Jason went stiff, his voice quiet. "Is Tommy?"

Maddie remained silent as Alex waited with a hopeful look on his face. He held the dog securely and presented one front paw. A gash stood out on the dog's forearm. Just yesterday, she'd shaved the fur away from the cut. Her neat row of stitches was visible, at least where they hadn't been torn out by doggy teeth.

Silent anger emanated from the man, and she was suddenly afraid he would lash out at Alex.

"Would you like me to take over for you?" Maddie asked. "I'm sure such a prestigious doctor such as yourself has more important tasks to look after."

There was a definite hesitation before Jason shook his head. "I'll be happy to stitch him up."

Fine.

She waited only a moment to ensure he would take good care of Alex and the pup before she slipped away.

If she never had to speak to Doctor Jason Goodwin again, that would be too soon.

"Miss Maddie says Tommy is the best dog she's ever met." The boy, Alex, spoke as Doc slipped the first stitch into the dog's leg.

Although Alex held the dog's head against his shoulders with one arm, Doc eyed those canine teeth warily. They were only a few inches away from his fingers.

Maddie Fairfax had done a decent job shaving the one-inch cut, and her sutures were neat and tidy.

Maddie Fairfax had been a complete surprise. He'd meant to meet the camp nurse that everyone praised so heartily, make a connection so they could perhaps work together. He hadn't been prepared to come face to face with her beauty, for the bolt of attraction that had caught him unawares and turned him inside out.

He hadn't so much as looked at another woman since Elizabeth had passed. Hadn't been tempted in the slightest.

When Maddie'd spoken with the gentle Irish lilt to her words, it hit him like a blow to the kidney. The spray of freckles across her pert nose, the intelligence in her blue eyes framed with sooty lashes that could tease or flirt. Beneath the bonnet, hair the color of fire. Strands had come loose somewhere along the way and framed a graceful jaw.

Her youth had come as another blow. Hearing folks talk, he'd expected to meet an experienced nurse, someone in her thirties or even older. Maddie looked to be eighteen or nineteen at most.

"D'you like dogs?" Alex asked, his curious voice breaking Doc from his distracted thoughts.

Doc shrugged.

Please can we have a puppy? Papa, please! The voice from the past—Hildy's voice when she'd been only six years old—echoed inside him, the split-second of memory threatening to overpower him with pain.

Men's voices from nearby offered a welcome distraction.

Doc cleared his throat. He put in another stitch even as he widened his awareness to a bigger circle than this untidy campsite.

Something was going on. He caught sight of Owen Mason on horseback outside of the circle of white-covered wagons. Owen seemed to be having a word with two other men on horseback, his expression a fierce frown.

Doc had only known Owen for a matter of weeks, but he was well aware of the other man's brand of stubbornness. They'd met when Owen and his wife Rachel had been seeking to join an Eastbound wagon train. The very company Doc had joined with earlier in the spring. When Owen had gotten into an altercation with one of the wagon masters, he and Rachel had been ejected from the company. Wary of the wagon master's temper, Doc had set out with the pair.

Thank heaven he had. For Rachel had grown sick from an infection after the birth of her infant daughter. Owen didn't sleep for three days, building a shelter, toting water, praying over her. Willing her to live.

"Miss Maddie says he's the best dog ever," Alex said. The boy almost buzzed with energy, even as he stood holding the dog.

Miss Maddie. She'd only just gone, but Doc was still reeling with awareness of her presence. He burned with shame. Not only was he far too old to be noticing—he must

be at least fifteen years her senior—but his heart still belonged to his wife. It didn't matter that she was gone?—

Deceased.

His mouth turned down in a grim frown as his thoughts focused. He couldn't let himself twist the words.

Face the truth. Elizabeth was deceased.

But he was still her husband. And it wasn't right, the bolt of instant attraction he'd felt for Maddie.

As far as he was concerned, the less he saw of her, the better.

Another stitch finished. Only a few more to go.

Another boy—twelve or thirteen, he guessed—appeared from around the wagon. "Yeah, but Miss Maddie says yer supposed to take a bath every week and wash behind yer ears, and you don't do that."

He tossed the words over his shoulder with a smug brotherly grin and headed off somewhere else among the camp.

Alex's mouth twisted into a grimace. "Ya got any brothers, Doc?"

"No." Doc kept his focus on the animal's paw. The dog squirmed in Alex's hold now. "Can you hold him tighter?"

"I dunno." Alex readjusted the dog in his arms. "He's rumblin' an' growlin' at me. C'mon Tommy."

There.

The last stitch. Doc quickly tied off the catgut and grabbed some disinfectant from his medical bag.

"Good boy," he said stiffly as the dog wriggled in Alex's arms.

Alex started to put the dog on the ground, but the animal leapt away, landing on its feet.

"You'll want to keep him from being too active—don't let him run around so much," Doc cautioned.

That seemed a lost cause, as the dog was already bounding through the nearby field, chasing a butterfly.

Alex stood with hands in his pockets and a lift of his chin that reminded Doc of another little boy. Alex squinted slightly. "I ain't got no money to pay ya."

Doc shook his head. "It's all right."

Alex brightened. "I knew you was a kindred spirit. Ya like dogs, doncha?"

Hildy had loved dogs. Cats. Birds. Lizards. Animals of all kinds. He could vividly remember the way his daughter's eyes had pleaded when she'd asked for a puppy of her own.

And then the memory-image of his daughter changed to darkness and a thunderous noise. Her screams echoed in his ears.

"Doc," Alex prodded.

The boy's voice had shaken him out of the nightmarish memories, but there was no escaping them. Not when they lived inside him.

He stiffened. "Goodbye Alex."

The boy's face fell, but Doc snapped his medical bag closed and turned on his heel. He strode away, needing to run. His chest locked up, breaths sawing in and out of his lungs.

"Doc, you hungry for lunch?" Rachel's friendly call hailed him, but Doc barely spared her a wave.

He strode out of the circle of wagons, away from camp, as far as his feet would carry him.

Maybe he'd keep on walking. Forever. Just disappear into the land.

Like his family had.

But in only a quarter of a mile he slowed to a stop.

There were a lot of folks on this wagon train heading to Oregon. Close to two hundred souls. These folks needed someone with medical expertise to help them—not someone with patchwork knowledge and a handful of herbs, like the young Maddie Fairfax.

He still didn't know why he'd been spared on that fateful night. What did God want from him? But one thing he did know. He couldn't walk off into the sunset. Couldn't give up, couldn't stride out into the wilderness and die.

No matter how badly he wanted to.

Lily Fairfax heard the jaunty whistle as she dragged the large pile of canvas that made up the tent she shared with her sister Maddie from the wagon to a bare patch of ground nearby. The playful tune was familiar, and she couldn't help glancing over at the group of hired hands gathered around their campfire just outside the circle of wagons.

Harry Ransome was building the fire while holding an animated conversation with another man lounging against a saddle nearby. A third man was picketing his horse.

Lily quickly ducked her head, not wanting to draw attention to herself. Or maybe she did, because her fingers fumbled and lost their hold on the canvas and the unwieldy bundle fell to the ground with a loud thump.

Bootsteps hurried in her direction as she knelt to gather the tent back up, but it had unfolded too much.

"Need some help?"

She'd had a smile ready, but it slipped when she looked up to see the cowboy who'd been settling his horse. Not Harry.

"Oh. Um. Thank you."

He smiled broadly, a flash of white teeth against his tanned skin. Reached for one corner of the canvas, opposite her, and began to unfold it. "I'm Luther. Most ever'body calls me Lucky."

"Lily."

"That's a pretty name."

She fumbled the corner of canvas she'd been trying to straighten and had to bend to fix it. And was a little glad of the chance to hide her face.

That's a pretty name. They were the same words Harry had said a handful of weeks ago when he'd introduced himself on a lengthy walk back from the creek where Lily had been tasked with washing laundry.

He'd smiled at her, too, eyes sparkling beneath the brim of his hat as he'd offered to carry her laundry basket full of wet, heavy clothing.

That had been the first of numerous days they'd bumped into each other. She'd grown to count on his smiles to break through the drudgery of this never-ending journey. Harry made her laugh. He made her heart flip inside her when he looked at her in that way that only he could. They'd grown close.

She'd waited each day for the handful of minutes—sometimes more—they would be together. Until two weeks ago, when he hadn't come to her at all.

Lucky asked a few questions about placement of the support pole inside the tent as they worked together to set it up. But Lily was mostly aware of Harry at his campfire, so close he could probably hear every word she and Lucky said.

She'd prayed for this very thing for days. For the wagon that belonged to the three Fairfax sisters to be parked near Leo Spencer's when the wagons circled up for the night. There were two hundred travelers in their company. Leo was one of the captains. And he was the man who'd hired on several cowboys to help him bring his herd of cattle to Oregon. At night, the cowboys who weren't on watch bedded down near the Spencer wagon.

It should be Harry helping with her tent. She'd spent a frantic few moments with her head and shoulders ducked inside the wagon to tame the wisps of hair that always

seemed to curl around her face. To pinch some color into her cheeks.

But Harry hadn't even left his campfire. And she didn't know whether she had the courage to walk across the expanse of grass—with the other cowboys watching—and speak to him.

Once the tent seemed sturdy enough, she thanked Lucky for his help. The young man walked back to join the cowboys, and she heard the cadence of voices ring out as if they were ribbing him.

And at that moment, Harry glanced up. Their gazes met and held. The flickering campfire gilded his skin gold and turned the tips of his hair a burnished copper.

He averted his face without smiling.

Her stomach tumbled. She turned away from the tent and walked to the wagon on wobbly legs while her stomach churned. It had been doing that a lot lately. Every time she remembered his tender words, whispered into her hair. Remembered his kisses.

And then his silence.

She dragged her bedroll out of the wagon and had no choice but to cross the campsite and put it in the tent. The sunset cast vivid colors across the sky. It was beautiful—or it should have been. She was too heartsick to enjoy it. She wanted nothing more than to curl up inside her tent and hide. But Stella and Collin and Maddie would be expecting to find supper cooking over the fire.

She took the few steps toward the tent. Suddenly Harry was there, his boots hesitating at the edge of her campsite.

Her heart flew into her throat as she pretended casualness.

"Hullo, Lily."

"Hello." It wasn't the smile she'd meant for him earlier, but she gave it anyway.

He didn't smile back. She couldn't understand what had changed between them. Had she done something wrong?

"Why haven't you been around?" She wanted to call the words back as soon as they escaped. She hadn't meant for the first thing she said to sound so accusing.

His eyes flashed before he looked at the ground. "Been busy. The cattle. And all."

And all.

What did that mean?

The words were there, on the tip of her tongue, to ask him whether he'd meant any of the lovely sentiments he'd shared. If someone else had caught his fancy. If he regretted the kisses they'd shared. And everything else.

But as the silence grew longer and more awkward between them, everything bottled up inside her.

As she moved toward the tent, she loosened her hold on the bedroll. It shifted in her arms. The circlet of flowers she'd kept hidden away inside it tumbled to the ground.

For a fractured moment, she registered him staring at the daisy chain before she bent and scooped it up, face flaming.

Never seen such talent, he'd teased her as she'd woven the chain of blooms the last time they'd been together. It was a girlish trick, something to keep her hands busy as they'd talked long into the night, sitting on a picnic blanket under the stars well after the campfires in the company had winked out. She'd wanted something to keep her hands busy because she'd ached to reach for him. To feel his arms around her, to experience his kiss.

She'd gotten her wish that night.

Weeks of silence had followed.

And now he'd seen that she'd kept the flowers as a memento. He must realize she was still pining over him.

"Excuse me," she mumbled, making quickly for the tent so she could hide her humiliation.

"Lily—" His voice stopped her in her tracks, but another voice called out, too.

"Do you need help with supper?" Stella said from behind the canvas-covered wagon.

By the time Lily looked up, Harry was striding into the dusk to where the horses were tethered.

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TWO WEEKS LATER

Coop Spencer had lived through his share of barrel fever.

He liked to imbibe when the occasion was right, and the occasion was right pretty often.

But he'd never been knocked on his hindquarters like he was right now. From the typhoid.

He'd heard the frightened whispers from other pioneers in their company. Dismissed them, the same as he had the whispers about bear attacks and raiding parties.

He'd been wrong.

Three days of heaving his guts out, with a fire inside his stomach and crawling through his skin. And far as he could tell, he seemed to be doing better than most everyone in his family, except for his sister Alice.

Right now camp was quiet. Lotta folks sleeping off the illness. He fed a bit of kindling into the fire from where he lounged against his saddle and watched as his older brother Leo crawled out of the tent he shared with his wife and young adopted daughter. Leo made it to his feet but only took two steps forward before he had to lean on the nearest wagon for support.

"Why aren't you out with the cattle?" If Leo's voice had held concern or even curiosity instead of derision, Coop would've pointed to the pot of broth on the edge of

the fire. He'd have told Leo that he'd spent hours on wobbly legs toting bowls of nourishment to Collin and Stella, August and Felicity, Owen, Rachel, and checking on little Molly.

Leo had been the recipient of one of those bowls when Coop had delivered food to him and Evangeline and Sarah just this morning.

But since Leo had asked his question with such an air of disdain, Coop drawled, "I checked on the cattle earlier."

"Where's Owen?" Leo leaned heavily on the back of the wagon. His face was pale, a feverish flush high on his cheeks. His eyes were sunken. He looked as if a stiff wind might blow him over.

"Been down for days."

Leo hadn't asked about Coop, only expected more. Like always.

Leo had known Owen for all of four months. Apparently, the man was the spitting image of Leo and Alice's father—the same one who'd abandoned them and divorced their mother before the two siblings could even walk or talk. Twins Coop and Collin had been born after Leo's mother remarried. It was Coop—and Collin—who had stepped up to help the family after losing first their father and then their mother.

It was Coop who'd held things together for the past few days while everyone else had been so sick they couldn't get out of their bedrolls. But Leo didn't seem to remember who'd spoon fed him broth early this morning when he was too weak to lift his head from the pillow.

Several of the cowboys Leo had hired on—Coop had come to consider them friends—had been hit hard with the typhoid, but two of the men had recovered enough to sit in the saddle, and they'd been watching over the herd.

"You should be out there," Leo chided.

Coop shifted from where his right shoulder leaned into a large fallen log. His stomach protested every movement, threatening to bring back up the broth that he had eaten an hour ago. He ignored the queasiness, movements slow while breathing steadily through his nose. He took the lid off the pot, giving it a stir with the long-handled ladle.

"I sorta thought humans were more important than bovines." He gave the pot a good stir, keeping his focus there. He didn't have to look at his older brother to know Leo's expression would be a mix of disappointment and suspicion.

Two weeks ago, Coop had made a promise to himself that he was going to clean up his behavior. Stop imbibing so much. Prove to his family that he could provide and protect just as well as Leo or Collin. With both his brothers married on the trail, and distracted by their pretty wives, Alice needed more help than ever.

But it'd meant long nights of fighting off his demons, trying to drift off to sleep without the whiskey relaxing his muscles and making him forget. And Leo was still riding him, watching Coop's every move. He hadn't seemed to notice any improvement in Coop's manner. His constant disappointment and frustration wore at Coop like a burr under his saddle.

"You want some broth?" Coop asked as he tapped the ladle against the side of the pot. Maybe Leo would go back to bed and leave Coop alone. But his question seemed to jolt Leo out of his thoughts.

"Where's Alice?" he growled.

Coop felt the grim expression slip over his features. "Gone. She rode off yesterday." With Robert Braddock. Coop kept that news to himself. Leo would have a fit if he knew. "Headed for the fort, I think."

Almost half of their company had gone off and left the rest under Owen's leadership. Hollis and the others had hoped to find help at the fort. Maybe Alice thought she could do the same.

"You let her ride off alone?" Leo's voice exploded out of him, but the man himself could barely take a staggering step before he had to cling to the wagon's side for balance. If he'd been hale, Coop might've found himself knocked to the ground at the vitriol in his brother's voice.

"No one lets Alice do anything."

Leo was overprotective and controlling. A quintessential older brother. But Alice was strong in her own way. She wasn't one to be pushed around. She was the backbone of their family.

"What if she rides into trouble?" Leo demanded.

"Been trying not to think about it too hard," Coop let the words drawl from his mouth again, knowing they would infuriate his brother.

Coop had fought off his own worries about Alice over the past days. At least she wasn't alone, even if Coop didn't trust Braddock one whit.

"You should've stopped her. Or gone with her."

Coop ignored his brother. When she'd left, Coop could barely stagger out of his bedroll long enough to fetch water to keep himself alive. He'd puked his guts out, fought off a fever that made every muscle weak and shaky.

And after he'd realized Alice was gone, what she'd done, he'd known there was no one else among their family that could keep the fire going long enough to boil water or make broth to sustain everyone.

A silent roar of anger lodged in Coop's throat. It wasn't fair that Leo couldn't see what he'd done for the family. Only his failings.

"You just don't think, do you?" Leo spat the words. "You're careless. Still. After everything this family's done for you."

Coop slammed the pot lid down, hand shaking.

"What this family's done for me?" He got to his feet, ignoring the wobbly feeling in his legs, the streak of heat down his spine. "You made us leave all our friends. The only home we've ever known."

Coop had visited his mother's grave in the scant few hours he'd been given to pack up before his siblings abandoned the tenement. He still ached thinking about leaving her there alone.

"You're the reason we had to leave," Leo said coldly. "The reason Collin and I lost our jobs."

The reason their friend had died. Leo didn't have to say the words for them to batter Coop. He'd heard the whispers when his siblings thought he wasn't listening. They'd believed the coppers were coming for Coop because of his negligence in the explosion at the powder mill where the three brothers had worked. The mill owned by Braddock's grandfather.

Neither of Coop's brothers had cared to ask him the truth.

Bitterness welled.

"I guess you can get your own broth." Coop stalked off into the night, slowly. For a moment, he thought his stomach would revolt, but its contents stayed put.

Why was he torturing himself? Why try to stay on the straight and narrow when Leo couldn't see past his own prejudices to recognize the contributions Coop had made?

Leo treated him like a toddler.

And Coop was finished settling for it.

If they'd been in a city or even a town, he'd walk away from his family. They didn't want him here. Didn't need his brand of trouble. Leo might as well have said as much.

But the company was in the middle of the wilderness. He couldn't just walk away with no money and no supplies.

Leo thought he didn't contribute. Let his older brother see what things were really like if Coop slacked off completely.

Because he was done.

"What do I do if his fever won't come down?" the young mother asked.

Doc lifted his ear from the small boy's chest, where he'd listened to a good, strong heartbeat and several breaths.

"It will come down, in time," he reassured her.

"Mama," a new voice with a note of whine that made Doc want to slip into a memory from his own past.

He held steady and kept his focus on this new patient, the small boy who crawled into the pallet this young mother had crafted underneath the stationary wagon. The tot couldn't be more than two. He was flushed with fever, eyes glassy as he settled beside

his mother and brother.

"Beh-yee," the toddler whined. Belly.

The young mother looked as if she wanted to weep, but she held out her arms and the boy crawled over his older brother's feet to come to her. She took him in her arms, settling him on her lap.

His head rested against her shoulder and she reached for the bowl of cool water Doc had brought along with him when he'd come to check on this family. She dipped a rag in the water, squeezed out the extra with one fist, and pressed the damp rag to her boy's forehead and cheeks.

Doc reached to close his black medical bag on the ground next to him. There were many other families to check on, and it wouldn't be long before night fell.

Days ago, when the first few pioneers had fallen ill with typhoid, Owen had been in a fierce argument with Hollis, the wagon master. Hollis had insisted on pushing forward, trying to reach the fort for supplies and help.

At least half the company had gone with him, including Maddie Fairfax. Doc had been glad of it. Her presence was a distraction he didn't need. But over the past days, the worst had happened. Nearly the entire company had been afflicted with typhoid. Every family had been infected.

People were dying.

Owen was sick. His wife, Rachel, too.

Doc was fighting a losing battle.

He'd be lucky to catch a few hours of sleep.

Doc glanced up to give the young mother a few more words that might reassure her. When his glance cut to her, he caught sight of the boy's flushed face and small hand that came up to rest against her neck. An innocent embrace, a silent need for comfort. The young woman bent to press her cheek against the boy's forehead, eyes shining with love and worry.

The shared moment between mother and son pulled Doc into his own memories and he was helpless against them.

Elizabeth had been up late with JJ, their second child and oldest boy. Jason had awoken to find her sitting up in bed, the four-year-old curled in her lap.

"He sick?" Jason mumbled the words, pressing one hand against his right eye socket to try and wake himself. It'd been a late night delivering a baby; he felt as if he'd barely closed his eyes.

Now his son needed him.

"Go back to sleep," Elizabeth whispered. "It's only a bad dream."

A bad dream. Not sickness.

Jason relaxed back into the softness of the feather-tick, one elbow behind his head. His son's soft cries faded to an occasional snuffle and Jason reached out his other hand to press against JJ's back.

His hand tangled with Elizabeth's. She'd lit a candle at some point and the soft, flickering light filled the room, illuminating her profile and gilding the edges of her hair gold. Her humming was soft enough not to wake the other children.

Jason could barely keep his eyes at half-mast, but he saw the way JJ's body sagged in her embrace. Nearly asleep again. JJ's hand came up to rest against her neck.

Completely secure in her love. Safe from whatever had haunted his nightmares.

A wave of love swept over Jason. Elizabeth would always be there, the perfect partner for him.

He snapped the medical bag closed, forced himself out of the torturous memories.

But it was too late.

The cloak of grief and sorrow slipped around him, heavy and choking.

"I'll come around to check on you in the morning." He steeled himself against the sight of the tears standing in the young mother's eyes, the fear deeper inside them.

He paced away, past the edges of the circled wagons, out into the twilight prairie. He couldn't help the young mother. There was no medicine to eradicate the sickness. Peppermint candy could soothe a stomachache, but it wasn't a fix. And even that was scarce now that the company had been on this journey for months. Willow bark tea could help with the pain, but it was only managing a symptom.

He was helpless.

If the two children could overcome the fever and stomach cramps, hold down some food over the next few days, they'd survive. Doc had nothing more to give her. No more comforting words.

He might as well have died in the rockslide.

His clenched back teeth caged a scream. If he opened his mouth, or breathed too deeply, he wouldn't be able to hold it in.

Keep working.

The single thought that penetrated the self-hatred and choking grief was enough to give him the fortitude to take a breath. That one thought was enough to cling to.

He made himself turn back to the company, stride through the circled wagons.

There. Someone was up and around in Owen's camp. Doc headed that direction.

Owen fed sticks and twigs to a fire, making it crackle and grow in the deepening light. Doc sidled next to Owen, who squatted next to the growing flames.

"Still feverish?"

Owen nodded, looking peaked. "I thought to make some more of that willow bark tea for Rachel. She needs to keep her strength up for the baby."

Rachel had survived a near-fatal infection after she'd given birth to Molly, still only a few weeks old. Owen had fallen hard and fast for the independent woman he'd married only for convenience's sake. Now Doc saw the worry lines bracketing his friend's mouth.

Doc brought over the nearest pail of fresh creek water so Owen wouldn't have to fetch it to add to the coffee pot. He looked as if a strong breeze might keel him over.

"Firewood's running low."

Doc saw Owen's glance at the woods a hundred yards to their north.

"We've been camped here too long," Doc said. "Folks have picked up what loose kindling and logs were freely available."

Owen frowned.

Doc knew what he must be thinking. Almost every single man in their smaller company had been hit hard by the typhoid—Doc was likely the only one left with the strength to use an ax, chop down a tree or split kindling.

Yet Doc was needed here. Even now, someone else moaned from a tent a dozen feet away.

"I've never been this sick before," Owen said. He pressed one hand against his stomach. He was nearly doubled over.

Doc had never suffered from typhoid, but the stomach cramps he witnessed in others were terrifying on their own.

"You've a strong constitution." But Doc's voice cracked as he said the words. He'd only known Owen for a matter of weeks, but the man had become a close friend.

Owen let out a blast of breath. "Check on Rachel for me, will you?"

Doc knew there was little he could do for his friend, knew that if Owen pushed too hard it wouldn't be good. But Doc was in desperate straits, the last man standing in this camp of gravely ill pioneers. If Owen wanted to make tea, he'd let him.

Inside the tent Owen and Rachel shared, Rachel was curled on her side on top of the quilt. The baby slept only inches away, and Rachel had placed one hand on the babe's diaper. Maybe reassuring herself even as she slept that the baby was there.

Rachel's color was better. Her cheeks were a healthy pink, not flushed with fever. She seemed to be sleeping peacefully, face slack and relaxed. She'd been one of the first to suffer from the ailment. Maybe she'd already turned a corner.

Doc was loath to wake her. He gently put one finger at the inside of her wrist where she touched the baby. Her skin was cool and dry.

Hoofbeats thudded from outside the tent. Doc knew that Owen's little sister Alice, along with another traveler, had left camp on horseback days ago. Owen had been furious.

Had they returned?

But this sounded like numerous horses?—

Doc backed out of the tent and let the flap down gently, so as not to wake Rachel or the baby.

Owen had straightened to his full height but looked unsteady on his feet.

Ten or more soldiers on horseback appeared. With Alice. Hollis, their former wagon master, with his rich brown skin and muscular build, dark eyes watchful beneath the brim of his light-colored hat. Hollis's wife, Abigail, her tawny skin with a pale undertone as if she'd been ill.

And Maddie, riding close behind.

“You want me to see to them?” Doc asked Owen, who promptly sat down, pressing one hand to his temple.

“If you please.”

By the time he reached the center of the wagons, Hollis was off his horse and quietly speaking to the soldiers. He glanced up at Doc. Nodded.

Maddie was at the wagon master's side. Doc kept his eyes off her and focused on the man.