

Love's Pursuit 2: The Winter Trail
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Chapter One

Cascade Mountains, 1859

Amber Springs lay high in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains. Since the discovery of natural hot springs twenty years ago, it had become a common detour for wagon trains, their travel-weary occupants welcoming a hot bath in the soothing water.

As the sulfur springs gathered fame for their therapeutic properties, a hotel had been built to cater to the growing number of visitors. Amber Springs had prospered, and many travelers passed through in order to visit a doctor, replenish their supplies, and use the bathhouse. In addition to private residences, the town boasted a post office, a well-equipped general store, and a small church. It also had two saloons, one of which housed a bordello, but Evelyn Lockhart ignored them. She had no intention of setting foot in either of these establishments.

Unfortunately, Mr. Brennan had no such intention. He had been roaring drunk when he had finally returned to the hotel room he shared with his wife, who refused to let him enter due to his condition. The result had been a raucous screaming match to which Evie, rudely woken from her sleep in the next room, had been an uncomfortable witness. She had been unable to block the noise out, even with her pillow over her head, but she was long inured to their squabbles. At least she was only going with them as far as Jacksonville and not all the way to California.

She had no idea where Mr. Brennan had finally spent what was left of the night, but at daybreak when she and Mrs. Brennan had arisen, ready to continue their journey, he was missing. They spent a frustrating few hours seeking him, and Mrs. Brennan had finally found him on the sheltered porch of the church, still sleeping off his potations. The only surprise Evie felt was that, given the sharp and unexpected temperature drop

during the night, he had not died of the cold. She left Mrs. Brennan to shake her spouse into consciousness and went into Davis's General Store for some candy to sustain her on the road.

Entering the store, she was greeted kindly by its proprietress, Mrs. Davis.

"Heading for California?" The older woman had an air of one ready to gossip.

"Jacksonville," replied Evie, stripping off her gloves and holding her hands out to warm at the little stove in the middle of the store.

Mrs. Davis nodded. "Nice little town, I hear." Glancing at Evie's hands, she continued. "Young unmarried lady like you will have no trouble getting settled." She gave a knowing smile.

"Actually, I have been offered the post of teacher at a school for the town's children," Evie responded. "The current teacher is leaving to be married."

"Perhaps the same will happen to you," said Mrs. Davis, still smiling.

"I don't think—my fiancé—I was engaged, but—" Her voice became suspended, and she was unable to finish.

"Silly young man to abandon a fine gal like you," said Mrs. Davis comfortably. Evie said nothing to correct her assumption, unwilling to discuss the still painful loss. "Late in the season to be traveling, ain't it?"

Evie bit her lip, afraid the older woman was right. "We left in October. It was unseasonably warm, and we were told there were weeks of fine weather ahead of us. I thought we should be in Jacksonville by now."

"Mercy, child! It's turned November, and you are still days, weeks away from Jacksonville! What has your party been thinking, to be dawdling so?"

Evie gave a helpless little shrug. "The journey was supposed to take less than a month, but Mr. Brennan must have miscalculated."

"I don't think much of your bullwhacker." Mrs. Davis frowned mightily. "Hoppy tells me he was in his saloon till near closing time and falling down drunk when he left. He do that on the trail?"

"He does imbibe a little more often than I'd like," said Evie with a grimace. "Mrs. Brennan usually keeps some control. But every time we stop at a settlement, he—well, there is always a delay."

Mrs. Davis clicked her tongue in disapproval. "You should have been in Jacksonville by now, or nearly. Why, they might even give your post to someone else if they think you ain't coming."

"I'm not required until after Christmas—I'm not yet late." Evie gave a glimmer of a smile.

"Not \$yet@." Mrs. Davis glanced upward pensively. "Winter's going to be a fierce one, and early. I can feel it in my bones. My bones are never wrong." The older woman pursed her lips, thinking. Then she said, "Child, you should stop here for the winter. We don't have a school yet, but we do have a few children here that could use some learning. We couldn't pay you much, but we'd see to it that you had bed and board as well as a warm winter."

Evie was startled but pleased by the offer. "That is most kind, but I cannot stay in Amber Springs indefinitely. I need to get to Jacksonville. They are expecting me," she added a trifle wistfully.

"New trains will be going south in the spring. You can join one of them. And if they find another teacher in Jacksonville, a well-spoken gal like you could find another teaching post easy enough. You don't want to get stuck in a wagon in these mountains in the winter." Her voice dropped ominously. "You've know what happened to the Donner Party, of course."

Evie shuddered. The tragic story of the disastrous Donner Party wagon train, trapped in the Sierra Nevada over the harsh winter, was lurid enough to strike fear in

the heart of every traveler in the region, even after more than a decade. "Surely this trail is safe? Surely you are not cut off?"

"A bad winter could change that," said Mrs. Davis portentously. "Some folks who live higher up in the hills around here get cut off every winter, though they're well-prepared, of course. But no need to worry about having to eat your companions if you got stranded on the trail in that wagon. You'd likely freeze to death before you ran out of food," the older woman added with a gruesome cheerfulness.

"I shall consider staying on, Mrs. Davis," she replied seriously. "May I please have a penny's worth of your lemon candy?"

Mrs. Davis smiled. "You can stay in my son's old room. He's gone off last spring to the Fraser River."

"The new gold field?"

"That's it." The older lady scowled. "I'm a deal dubious myself—I saw what happened in California. Men who left their families behind on the farm to make their fortune and ended up with nothing but debt. Still, the boy has gold fever; maybe a year or two wading in mud will cure it! In the meantime, his room is empty. You'll be real comfortable in there." She shook a generous amount of shiny yellow balls into a paper cone and twisted the top. "You go collect your things and come on back here."

"I—I'll think about that, Mrs. Davis," said Evie, taking her candy.

As she left the store, Evie looked up, studying the sky. It was a distant cold blue with no sign of a cloud, yet she was increasingly worried that the weather might not hold. It was much colder today, and Mrs. Davis's warning only added to her unease.

She considered the advantages of staying in Amber Springs until spring. The town was pretty and well-kept, and it was growing; perhaps soon it would have need for a real school. If that happened, she might be able to stay long enough to form real attachments, to watch the children grow up instead of having to leave at the end of a short tenure. All the residents she had met so far were friendly, and she had even tried

the bathhouse. Though it had a faintly disagreeable sulfur smell, she had never had such a relaxing bath in her life, and it was an experience she would be eager to repeat.

Then she thought of the few measly dollars left in her purse, further depleted by her journey's unexpected costs, and knew she could ill afford the delay. She badly needed the three hundred dollars the citizens of Jacksonville had offered her. If another teacher was engaged when she did not arrive, she was not sure she would have enough to subsist on until she could find a new post. Her books were worth a great deal of money, but probably only in a city. In any case, she could not bear the thought of selling them. The post at Jacksonville might extend beyond the eight months she had been engaged for as well. Better to stick with the Brennans, she decided.

A sharp wind had picked up, and she ducked her head against its sudden chill, huddling into her coat and pulling the collar up around her face. She did not see the man standing outside the post office reading a letter until she walked into him.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Sir, I do apologize. I was not watching my step."

The man turned. She had the oddest sensation that his deep blue eyes looked into her and down to her soul. The stranger's mouth quirked into a smile, his eyelids dropping a little over the brilliant eyes.

"Ma'am, it's a pleasure," he drawled in a deep, soft voice, tipping his hat to her.

Unaccountably, Evie blushed. Having lived in Oregon Territory for ten years, where women were few and single ladies of marriageable age even fewer, she had become accustomed to being admired, even ogled, by men. Despite her distaste for the attention, she was never flustered by it as she was now. Maybe it was the striking eyes in his handsome face, the inherent grace in his movements, or his rich honeyed voice, but something reached deep inside and touched her. She shook herself, astonished and ashamed by her thoughts. She scolded herself. She was little better than a schoolgirl, craving a man's attentions, infatuated by a pleasing countenance.

She stepped away from the stranger, mumbling another confused apology before gathering up her skirts and hastening back to the hotel, where Mr. Brennan had surely

finished yoking up the oxen team. She did not dare turn to look behind her lest she give a hint of her unladylike interest to the tall stranger, but could feel his eyes boring into her back.

When she reached the sanctuary of the hotel, she dashed to the coffee room and peeped through a chink in the blinds, able to observe the street without being seen herself. She was disappointed to see that the stranger was gone and then felt a new irritation with herself for behaving like a besotted adolescent.

She settled her bill and took her belongings to the wagon. She heard Mr. Brennan before she saw him—his profanities were colorful enough to make her listen with curiosity, but she winced at his earsplitting volume. It took no great intelligence to deduce he was in a foul mood. Approaching the wagon, she saw he was working on the last yoke of oxen; they would be underway soon.

Mrs. Brennan sat at the front of the wagon. Her pale lips were pressed together and drawn into a downward slant, and there was a deep cleft between her brows, suggesting her mood was as vile as her husband's. Evie's heart sank at the prospect of the days ahead spent in the company of the volatile couple. Even after she left them she had nothing more to look forward to than a long dreary winter with the endless grind of teaching rote lessons to children she dared not allow herself get attached to, and then returning to a tiny room in a soulless and cold boarding house at the end of each day.

Longing surged through her as she thought again of staying in Amber Springs—and seeing the handsome stranger again. She did not think he was married. Instinctively her eyes had gone to his hand, and there was no ring. When he had cast his gaze on her, there had been a stirring in her breast, a feeling she had never known before but found oddly exhilarating. She dearly wanted to further her too-brief acquaintance with the unknown man, to discover what other pleasant feelings he could stir in her.

It would be so easy to have her trunks and bags lifted down and taken along to Mrs. Davis's neat house. But a vision of poverty and debt rose before her eyes, the fear

that always haunted her as a woman alone in the world. Reluctantly, she climbed into the back of the wagon and settled herself for the day's journey.

* * * *

Ash watched the young woman flee, glimpsing a well-turned ankle as she lifted her drab skirts above the muddy street. Another traveler, he surmised, passing through, and probably with her husband. He sighed to himself. It would be nice to be able to do more than look, especially with such a lovely girl.

Brunettes were usually more to his taste, but from the thick coronet of fair hair visible under her plain bonnet to the graceful feet clad in well-worn Adelaide boots, he thought the lady was very fine. Her drab clothing did nothing to hide her loveliness, but it was more than just her appearance that captivated him—there was a vitality in her countenance, a luminosity to her spirit that he could see shining from her like a tangible emanation. With those wide eyes in her elfin face, her golden hair neat about her head, her expression of adorable confusion, he thought she looked a little like an angel who had gotten lost in Amber Springs. Smiling at his whimsical fancy, he watched her until she disappeared into the hotel.

Stuffing his letter into his pocket, he opened the door to Davis's General Store, and a small figure cannoned into him. Instinctively, he grabbed and found himself holding Jillian, Mrs. Davis's second grandchild.

"Drat you, child!" cried Mrs. Davis. "You ain't hurt, are you, Ash?"

Ash laughed. "It'd take more than the little one to hurt me, Mrs. Davis!"

"Ash, I wanna pony ride!" said Jillian, flinging her arms around Ash's knees.

"Okay, Jillybean, up!" Ash hoisted the little girl onto his back and then jaunted around the floor of the shop while she screamed with delight.

Mrs. Davis laughed at their antics, mopping her eyes with her apron. Ash swung the girl down and gently nudged her toward her grandmother.

"Here, child, take these and go play outside." Mrs. Davis handed the girl a twist of paper with a few candies in it. "And share those with Sam!" she called as the little girl dashed through the back door. Mrs. Davis turned back to Ash. "Nice to see you in town again, Ash. How is everything up at Redcedars? You and your brother ready for the winter?"

Ash did not correct her, and in any case the whole town was under the same illusion. Valuing their privacy, he and Jake preferred everyone to believe their relationship was fraternal.

"Just came to collect the mail. He thought we'd need these too." Ash handed her a sheet of paper covered with Jake's neat handwriting.

Mrs. Davis perused his list. "Your brother's a wise man—I know you've plenty of supplies at Redcedars, but it don't hurt none to have more. It's setting to be a harsh winter this year."

"Reckon you're right."

"I always am, Ash! Mr. Davis might laugh at me, but I can feel it in my bones. As I was just telling that young lady who was in here a moment or two ago—did you see her? She's a newcomer, just got into town yesterday."

Ash pricked his ears up, surprised. He had not thought he would see her again and was most pleased to hear she was staying.

"Sure seemed in a hurry; near ran me down. Pretty thing she was..." he trailed off, hoping Mrs. Davis would fill him in with more details. She did not disappoint him.

"Well, she'll be staying in town until the spring. I told her it was nonsensical to continue on now. She was headed for Jacksonville in a prairie wagon, but they got a drunk for a bullwhacker, if you believe what I hear tell. Brennan's their name, though I never did get that gal's name; she's no relation I understand. Just him and his wife and the gal, small party for such a long trip, so late in the season too. Mr. Davis and I will have her with us. She'll have Joshua's old room now he's gone to Canada. She's a schoolmarm, you know, and it's about time Jilly and Sam had some schooling beyond

what their ma can teach them. Pretty young thing, like you say. Not married—yet.” Mrs. Davis gave Ash a sly look.

Ash felt his face redden, knowing the older woman had discerned his reason for asking about the unknown lady. Then he laughed. Mrs. Davis was unable to resist matchmaking any likely couple, and he had no objection to her friendly hand helping along the courtship he was seriously considering.

“That could change,” he said gravely while his eyes twinkled. “Planning to leave at first light; I’d sure be grateful if Hank could help load up the wagon tonight.”

Mrs. Davis nodded. “No trouble, Ash. Bring the wagon along in a couple of hours, and the supplies will be ready.” Then she added with a roguish grin, “Check the hotel. That’s where she stayed last night.”

Ash gave Mrs. Davis a salute, his mouth twitching at the corners. She sure is an old tease, he thought fondly. He had intended to visit Madame Fifi’s saloon, probably his last opportunity for some female companionship this side of spring, but he decided to track down the young schoolteacher instead. His heart felt light to know she was here for the winter, although he and Jake would likely be stuck at Redcedars for much of the season. He thought about staying in town another day; it was never too soon to start courting. It might be a good idea to send Jake along before winter took hold, so he could meet her too.

Pushing his hat back on his head, he stepped into the street, only to retreat back to the walkway as a wagon pulled by four yoke of oxen came thundering along. He watched it go past with mingled admiration and annoyance. He shook his head at the teamster whipping up his team so fast through the town but was impressed he had managed to get his beasts to move at such a pace.

This would be the same man Mrs. Davis had mentioned, and Ash wondered if he was drunk still. He also wondered what kind of people were foolish enough to travel across the mountains this late in the season. For certain there was snow in the air, he thought; they might even get a light fall tonight. He was glad the young lady was

staying; it was far safer for her in Amber Springs, and, unlike Jacksonville, conveniently close to Redcedars. He grinned broadly at this thought, watching the wagon leave.

As the wagon sped along the road out of town, an elfin face peered out from the bonnet's opening at the wagon's rear. Ash's smile slid away as he recognized the schoolteacher.

Chapter Two

There was frost on the ground when Evie rose before dawn. Grimacing, she stamped her cold feet into her cold boots and laced them tightly. Though it had not snowed, the wind had picked up during the night, and Evie knew being on foot would keep her warmer than skulking in the wagon.

Evie preferred not to ride in any case—she suffered from motion sickness even in a well-sprung vehicle, which the wagon was not. Rain some days ago had left a few deep puddles here and there. These had frozen over during the night, though they would thaw to mud once the sun rose, but the road was, for the most part, dry, so her footing would be secure enough. The oxen rarely traveled at more than a walking pace, and she was young and fit; it was not difficult to keep up with them.

She helped Mrs. Brennan prepare a hot breakfast of cornmeal mush and coffee, and they were soon underway. Mrs. Brennan climbed inside the wagon to ride. Evie thought she must have a constitution of iron to not become ill in the swaying vehicle. The road had gotten rougher yesterday afternoon, and the jolting was so bad that Evie could not bear to be in the wagon for more than a few minutes without nausea overtaking her.

Mr. Brennan's mood was unusually exuberant for the time of day, and it took only a few minutes' conversation with him for Evie to realize he was drunk again. She was incredulous, wondering when he had imbibed as they had not yet stopped. She then observed him furtively remove a flask from his pocket and, with a glance at the wagon lumbering behind him, take a swig. She sighed. She should have known his illicit supply, which he always managed to keep cleverly hidden from his wife's eagle eye, would be replenished in Amber Springs. This time it seemed he was determined to be

drunk until it was gone. The tension between the married couple had not subsided since yesterday, and coupled with Mr. Brennan's drinking, Evie was starting to hope she would not regret leaving Amber Springs.

After trudging alongside the wagon in the dark for some time, the sun finally peeped over the mountains, casting a red light across the land, creating hollows and shadows and washing everything with a faintly pink glow. She fell far enough behind to avoid the inevitable dust and enjoyed the majestic scenery in solitude. Evie liked Mr. Brennan well enough, but conversation with an intoxicated person was tedious at best.

To compensate for their late start yesterday, they had halted later than they normally would have last night. They had surely traveled no more than ten or twelve miles from Amber Springs, but that was ten or twelve miles closer to Jacksonville, thought Evie with forced optimism. Although the days were rapidly shortening, they would be at least ten hours on the road today, which meant another twenty miles farther on their journey – more if the road improved.

The sun was well above the horizon when the wind finally dropped, and Evie was starting to feel warm. She threw her bonnet into the back of the wagon, removed her coat, and stuffed her gloves into a pocket. She draped it over the wagon's backboard, and, free of its restriction, swung her arms wide.

The vista they walked beside was magnificent. The road wound its way along the mountain, with a stony wall towering over them on one side and a precipitous drop on the other. Not afraid of heights, Evie went quite close to the edge to peer over and saw dark trees curving down to the valley below. It looked uncannily like a painting, so intense were the hues; a world of deep green broken here and there by a rocky crag lifting its head clear of the treetops, the plain far below them a pale shimmer with the thread of a road running along it. In the distance, purple domes of the white-topped mountains lined the horizon, long clouds gathering about their peaks, and the sky had a sheen across its blue face.

Her thoughts strayed to the handsome man from Amber Springs. The young waiter at the hotel had answered her questions incuriously, far more interested in picking at a florid pimple on his chin. She now knew the stranger's name—Ash Huntington—and that he lived up in the hills with his brother. And that he was only stopping in town briefly before traveling home on the same trail they were following. She had wondered all yesterday afternoon if he would overtake them on the road, and though she was reluctant to admit it, she hoped he would catch up with them today so she could see him again.

When she had seen Mr. Huntington staring after her as she and the Brennans had left the town, lifting his hand to her in farewell—or was it entreaty?—she had known a sudden and powerful longing to jump out of the wagon and go to him. The strength of that yearning frightened her. One cannot fall in love on sight, she told herself sternly. But the memory of his eyes, such a dark and clear blue, like fine sapphires, and with a cool radiance that penetrated deep into her core, kept returning to her mind. She recalled his strong but fine-boned face, his generous mouth complete with a charming smile, his windswept brown hair falling over his bright eyes. Was she really such a woman to invest so much in a handsome visage? And yet she had felt such a strong pull to him, as if they had some sort of connection.

She had certainly not felt drawn to her fiancé, Charles, in this way. She closed her eyes. It was starting to become difficult to remember what he looked like—they had always intended to have a daguerreotype image of themselves taken when they had become engaged, but somehow had never found the time. And then it had been too late, and he had been gone, taking her dreams of a calm and comfortable future with him. When he had finally succumbed to the fever that had wracked him for days, she had felt such an acute pain and loss, and she could never forget him or the affection they had shared, but somehow, without her being conscious of it, the lonely ache he had left in her heart lessened with every passing day. Analytically, she decided she must be a cold creature to so quickly be healed from such a blow.

But there was nothing cold about what she felt for Ash Huntington. Thinking of him again, there was a hollow in the pit of her stomach and a sudden weakness in her knees.

Lost in her reverie, she had failed to notice the wagon pulling ahead of her. The downward slope had become quite steep, and the wagon was going uncommonly fast, kicking up a great deal of choking dust and the occasional mud spatter when it went through a puddle. She ran to catch up with it and hopped nimbly up onto the backboard, scooting back on her bottom. She would get out once they slowed down again.

Through the opening of the wagon's cover she could see Mr. Brennan sitting at the front of the wagon. He urged the oxen on with yells and what seemed an injudicious application of his whip, and Evie was surprised that he was pushing the beasts so hard down the steep incline.

The wagon rattled and bounced unpleasantly over the rough road, and she held on tightly. Her stomach lurched, and she wondered if she should get down and follow the wagon on foot instead—it would surely not take her that long to catch up. Before she made up her mind there was a sudden terrific jolt, a sickening crack, and Evie lost her grip. She was thrown clear of the wagon, striking her head and rolling to a huddled slump in the road. The wagon raced to the turn and toppled sideways over the edge, taking oxen, Mr. and Mrs. Brennan, and all their supplies with it.

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Want to know what happens next?

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