

CHAPTER ONE

The first sensation to register in Sherry Gallagher's waking brain was that of a pleasantly warm body snuggled against her own and arms holding her. Her eyes fluttered opened, and she smiled, stretching leisurely before rolling over to face her lover. "I love waking up with you."

Pat Calvin planted a kiss on Sherry's lips. "Likewise."

Sherry sighed, her tongue licking at the trace of her lover the kiss had left behind.

Pat pulled Sherry closer, slowly nibbling her way from chin to ear. "You taste very nice," she murmured, taking a nip here and placing a kiss there. Her hands roamed the toned body. "You feel good, too."

Sherry felt a hand sliding down her back, the fingers barely brushing against her skin but leaving a trail of fire in their wake. The hand paused to cup her buttocks, squeezing the firm tissue as a leg slipped between her knees and inched upward. Pat sucked a sensitive earlobe between her teeth, biting down gently. "Pat," Sherry gasped. Her body demanding more of her lover's touch, she rolled onto her back, pulling Pat with her. "I need you...inside."

Her mouth busy with exploring an ear, Pat pulled her hand out from under Sherry and cupped a mound of silky hair, pressing her palm against the heated flesh beneath the curls. Sliding her fingers downward, she spread Sherry's nether lips to uncover the bundle of nerves hidden inside. With the tip of her finger, she lightly touched the throbbing clit.

"More!" Sherry rolled her hips up to meet Pat's hand and spread her legs. Pat applied more pressure to the clit slowly rotating the nerve bundle. "Please," Sherry pleaded. "Inside."

Pat raked her teeth over the earlobe, distracting Sherry as she slid her fingers into the slick wetness of her lover. Her tongue traced the curves of Sherry's ear. "I love you," she whispered, an instant before plunging fingers into Sherry's overheated and throbbing vagina.

Sherry's cries of pleasure and the strong fingers raking along her back were all Pat needed to set off her own release.

"Have I mentioned how much I love waking up with you?" Sherry purred when she had recovered enough breath to speak.

"Every morning," Pat answered in a muffled voice, her face mushed against Sherry's breast where it had come to rest after her spent body collapsed. Her tongue snaked out to lick the nipple close to her lips.

Sherry slipped her fingers into Pat's hair, lightly scratching her scalp. "I love you."

"Love you, too, sweetheart," Pat said without leaving the nipple.

"Stop that," Sherry warned, swatting the hand gliding up the inside of her leg. "If you make me come one more time, I swear my heart is going to stop beating."

Pat rolled an eye up to look at the woman she loved. "Thought you liked it."

Sherry grinned, clamping her legs together. "I do. But after last night and this morning, I need time to recuperate. I swear, I can't believe how my body responds to your touch. Now, please get off of me."

"I'd rather investigate how your body responds to me," Pat mumbled, resuming her appreciation of Sherry's breast.

Sherry nudged Pat's shoulder. "Honey, you need to get off me."

Pat smacked the hand away. "Don't want to."

Sherry nudged harder. "Really, Pat. You need to let me up."

Surprised by the urgency in Sherry's voice, Pat rolled onto her back. "What's wrong?"

"I have to use the bathroom." Hurriedly plopping her legs over the side of the bed, she scampered the few steps across the bedroom to the sound of Pat's laughter. "It's not funny," she growled from inside the bathroom.

Pat laughed as she rolled off the mattress. "Sure it is." She limped into the bathroom, reached inside the shower stall, and twisted the faucets, then closed the door as the water warmed up. "You know, you're very sexy when you run around naked; all the right parts jiggle."

"They do, do they?" Sherry watched Pat limp to the basin and pick up her toothbrush and tube of toothpaste. Pat nodded, smiling at Sherry in the mirror, and Sherry smiled back, her eyes roaming up and down her lover's body. "You're not so bad yourself in the 'good to look at while naked' category."

"I'm not, huh?" Pat mumbled, her mouth foaming with toothpaste.

Sherry joined Pat, picking up her own toothbrush. "Nope."

Pat rinsed her mouth and asked, "So anything special you want to do today?" She grinned impishly. "Since you've already eliminated my preferred activity."

Sherry playfully bumped Pat with her hip. "Yes. You promised we could walk around downtown."

Since moving in with Pat a week before, Sherry had talked her into becoming her personal tour guide. She knew so little about the town she now called home that she wanted to see as much of Missoula and the surrounding area as they could squeeze in before resuming their duties with the Missoula Cougars, the local women's professional basketball team. The coming season would find her doing double duty as a point guard and assistant coach to the head coach, Pat.

"Okay." Pat reached into the shower stall to check the water temperature, then stepped inside. "Anything in particular you're looking for?" she called.

The selection of stores in the downtown area was quite eclectic, running the gamut from antique to modern and offering everything from clothing and footwear to kayaks and mountain climbing equipment.

"No." Sherry joined Pat in the shower. The cubicle had not been designed to be occupied by two people, but the women didn't find it confining as they eagerly lathered one another.

"That's the old Northern Pacific Railroad Depot." Pat pointed to the impressive brick building at the north end of Higgins Avenue. "This section of town used to be full of hotels for train passengers, railroad workers, and business travelers. And brothels for...whomever. Now the hotels have been turned into apartments, shops, restaurants, and antique shops. And secondhand stores like this one." She pulled open the door of a three-story brick building with *Atlantic Hotel* still visible in fading paint on its brick wall.

Pulling off her sunglasses, Sherry walked into the shop. The dimly lit and gloomy interior, looking as if it hadn't changed in the past hundred years, was crammed full of the castoffs of generations of Missoula residents. Just inside the door, glass display cases formed a square on the sales floor. The cases overflowed with watches, rings, pocket knives, and other small items. Jamming the shelves in the front window and those hanging along the walls, knick-knacks struggled for display space with old blenders, incomplete sets of chipped dishes, well-used cowboy boots, vases and other glassware, and photographs of people whose names were long forgotten. An older woman sat on a wooden barstool inside the square, keeping a close eye on the women as they investigated the store's offerings.

Sherry followed Pat as she meandered to the back of the shop where worn pieces of mistreated furniture and racks of secondhand clothing vied for the limited space on the floor, walls, and even the ceiling. She was drawn to a far corner where stacks of old books

were piled high on a rickety table. She carefully ran her hand down one stack, reading the faded lettering on the exposed spines. Seeing nothing of interest, she scanned another mountain of titles. She was just about to turn away from the books when one caught her attention. Partially sticking out from the middle of a pile was a book of unusual size. Sherry could just make out the bottom of a letter J embossed on the front of the book. Gingerly, she eased it out from the pile and was surprised to find a handsome hand-tooled leather cover adorned by a pair of J's.

"What have you found?" Pat asked, stepping between two floor lamps that didn't match.

"It appears to be some sort of journal," Sherry said as she carefully turned the first few fragile pages.

"A journal? Whose?"

"I don't know," Sherry murmured, continuing to page through.

"I don't think I see anything in here worth buying." Pat brushed her hands together to dislodge the dust they had collected while she examined a battered bookcase that she had no real use for. "Are you ready to leave?"

Sherry gently closed the journal. "I'm going to buy this."

"That's some nice work," Pat said, admiring the cover. "If nothing else, the cover is worth a few bucks."

"Come on, I want to get out into some good light. I can barely make out any of the writing in here." Sherry went to the front of the store and paid the asking price for the journal, surprising the shop owner when she didn't even attempt to haggle it lower.

"Want to find some place to sit and look at it?" Pat asked after they left the secondhand store.

"No. Let's wait until we get home. Some of the pages seem loose, and I'd hate for any to fall out."

They turned to walk the few blocks to the public parking garage where they had left Pat's pickup. "Want to grab some lunch before we head home?" Pat asked as they neared the three-story structure.

"Is there anything at home?"

Pat frowned, trying to visualize the contents of the sparsely stocked cupboards in the kitchen. "Peanut butter. And some jelly, I think. We really need to go to the market."

Carefully tucking the journal under one arm, Sherry wrapped the other around Pat's. "Tomorrow. Let's stop for takeout on the way. I want to see what secrets this journal holds."

"You expect to find the directions to some lost treasure in there?"

"You never know."

"Dreamer," Pat teased. "All right. Burgers? Chinese? What?"

"Burgers are fine."

"Burgers, it is."

Back at the house, Sherry chuckled as she pulled a pair of plates out of the plastic drying rack on the kitchen counter. "Sweetheart, we really need to do something about your lack of furniture and basic living essentials."

Pat looked around the kitchen and breakfast nook. "What do you mean?" She had purchased the house after becoming assistant coach of the Missoula Cougars. At the time, she owned only a few pieces of furniture and had simply never found it necessary to add to them, not even after being promoted to head coach and receiving a substantial raise in pay.

"You own two plates, two forks, two spoons, two steak knives, two coffee cups, two glasses, one medium-sized mixing bowl, and a water pitcher. Did I miss anything?"

"Salt and pepper shakers," Pat noted, placing the bags of hamburgers and French fries on the counter next to the plates.

"Both empty." Sherry laughed when Pat shrugged, conceding her point. "Your furniture consists of one bed, a couple of dressers, a bean bag chair, and a card table with only three matching chairs. That's not many furnishings for a three-bedroom house."

"Works for me," Pat said, emptying the bags and dividing the food between the two plates.

"What about company?" Sherry asked, carrying the glasses and water pitcher to the card table that served as a dining table. "Where do people sit when you have them over?"

"What company?" Pat grumbled, carrying the plates to the table. Becoming head coach had forced her to give up many of her friendships.

Sherry gazed sadly at the woman she hoped to spend the rest of her life with. Pat had grown up and attended college in Missoula and had many friends from those early days. But she had told Sherry how many of them now only wanted to talk about basketball and the Cougars, and the friendships had slowly dissolved over the years. It had been a hard pill to swallow, but Pat had come to understand that many people only wanted her friendship for the insider status and bragging rights it gave them. Sherry tried to think of something comforting to say but before she could, the doorbell rang.

Pat turned to look at the front door. "Who could that be?"

Sherry snatched a fry off her plate and tossed it into her mouth. "Maybe if you went over and opened the door, you could find out," she teased.

"Smart ass," Pat muttered, walking out of the kitchen.

When the door opened, Pete Sundee walked into the house without waiting for an invitation. Laughing again at the bare living room, she asked, "You ever planning to move in?"

"Hi, Pete," Sherry called out from the kitchen.

Pete headed in the direction of Sherry's voice. "Hey, Rookie, I'm not interrupting anything, am I?" Pete was also a point guard for the Cougars and had adopted the affectionate nickname for Sherry during her first season.

"Yes," Pat grumbled, closing the front door.

Sherry waved when her teammate entered the kitchen. "No. We just got home. We've got burgers if you're hungry. Sit down."

"Thanks for the offer, but..." Pete sniffed the air, then vigorously rubbed her nose. "Those smell greasy. Where'd you get them? At the Grease Never Changes Café?"

Pat strode past her uninvited but not unwelcome guest to take a seat at the table. Picking up a burger, she took a huge bite, moaning in pleasure while she chewed. "Greasier the better," she mumbled around a mouthful of burger.

Sherry swatted Pat's arm. "Stop that. She's going to think that you have no manners."

Laughing, Pete said, "Too late for that, Rookie."

Pat used her foot to push the third folding chair out from the table. "Sit," she told Pete.

Pete shook her head. "Sorry, I really wish I could. I've missed you guys. But I've got to get home. I promised hubby I'd make his favorite for dinner."

"How is Keith?" Sherry asked.

"Good."

"So what brings you over here?" Pat asked.

"I, um..." Pete hesitated. "I wasn't sure you two were paying much attention to the news. And...well..."

Pat stood and walked to the end of the counter, where she sorted through the envelopes and magazines she had picked up from the mailbox. "You talking about this?" she asked, tossing a well-known sports magazine on the table.

Pete frowned. "Yeah. I thought I should warn you if you hadn't already seen it."

Sherry picked up the magazine and read the banner splashed across the cover: "Missoula Cougars Add Coach's Lover to Staff." "That didn't take long," she muttered, opening the magazine to read the accompanying article. "Let's see if they at least spelled my name right."

"Doesn't that bother you?" Pete asked at the lack of reaction the two women were showing.

Pat shrugged as she sat down to resume eating, disappointed at the unwanted attention but not surprised. "Yes. But there isn't anything we can do about it. We knew it would happen. Now it has."

"At least, it doesn't say we were having an affair during the season," Sherry said, relieved that the widely whispered rumor had not made it into print. If the rumor could be proven true, it would end both their careers.

"Doesn't matter. That's what everybody thinks. Guess we should have just gone ahead and done it," she groused.

Sherry reached out and clasped Pat's hand. "Sweetheart, you have too much integrity for that. People can think what they want, we know the truth."

Pat looked into Sherry's eyes. It had required all of her willpower *not* to take the woman as a lover during the season, but she was glad she hadn't. Now, no matter what anyone else thought, said, or wrote, they could go forward with their life together knowing they had done the right thing under some rather difficult circumstances. "I love you," Pat whispered.

Sherry smiled. "I love you, too."

"I guess I could have saved myself a trip," Pete said, snagging a French fry off Pat's plate then turning away from the table. "I'll let myself out."

"No," Pat stood to follow her friend, "I'm glad you cared enough to come by," she said honestly. "Maybe when I can talk Sherry into buying some furniture, you and Keith will come over for dinner. Ow," she yelped as a flying potato missile smacked into the back of her head.

"You're lucky it wasn't a plate," Sherry yelled. "But we don't have any of those to spare."

Pat glared back into the kitchen at a grinning Sherry. "I suggest you don't do that again."

Pete laughed, then ran for the door when a barrage of fries flew from the kitchen. "I'll see you two later."

"Hey, Pat," Sherry said as she picked the last of the French fries off the floor and tossed it into the wastebasket Pat was carrying.

"Hmm?"

"Something I've been meaning to ask you."

"What's that?" Pat returned the wastebasket to its place under the sink.

"You and Pete are friends," Sherry said as she returned to her hamburger.

"Yes."

"Pretty good friends."

"Yes, again."

"How do you manage that when you, as coach, are not supposed to have off-court relationships with any of the players?"

Pat sat down at the table and filled a glass with water. She placed it in front of Sherry, then poured one for herself. She took a bite of her hamburger and chewed as she sorted out her thoughts. "Pete was the first member of the Cougars I met when I joined the team, not counting Mac, of course."

"I remember. You told me about that first day when you showed up for your assistant coaching debut."

"I'll always be grateful that she took time to talk to me that day. My leg was still pretty stiff after the surgery and I was full of self doubts. But she made me believe in myself again."

Sherry nodded approvingly. "That was nice of her."

"It was. But she did more that day than just give me faith that my leg would come back. I was coming in as a former standout college player who could barely walk, and I was supposed to show players older than me how to play the game. Some, like Pete, had been playing in the league for over five years. To say I was scared shitless would be an understatement."

"And Pete told you you could do it."

"Yes. She told me I could do it, and when I said I wasn't sure, she gave me some of the best advice I've ever received."

"What was that?"

"She told me that unless I had confidence in myself as the coach, no player would ever have confidence in me."

"Smart woman."

"That's what I thought. I guess you could say we've had a bond ever since that day."

"That's easy to understand. But..."

"It still doesn't explain how we can be off-court friends?"

"Right."

"Well, she's straight, she's married, she was an established player in the league when I got my start, and..."

"And?"

"And Mac is okay with it. She knows Pete keeps me grounded." The look of hurt that crossed Sherry's face for an instant did not go unnoticed. "That is, she did until you came into my life." Pat reached for Sherry's hand and squeezed it lovingly.

"Do you think Mac put her up to talking to you that day?"

"No. I think Pete is a super nice woman. Everyone, including me, knew Mac had primarily offered me the assistant coach position because I was a local girl and I still had a lot of fans that would buy tickets to see me — even if I was only sitting at the end of the bench. Pete somehow knew I would need a friendly face when we were on the court, someone to see me as a human being and not just a first-year coach. I'll never forget she did that for me."

"Me, either."

"We've tried to keep the friendship under the radar, not really hiding it but not making a big deal out of it, either. Seemed to work. I've never had another player complain about it. Neither has Mac. I think it helped that Pete was an established player already, one that Mac depended on. Being my friend wasn't really going to improve her standing with the team. If anything, I was the one who came out ahead on the deal."

"I think you both did."

"You do, huh?" Pat lifted an eyebrow.

"Yes."

"Maybe so. Besides, Pete's a lot of fun. And her husband is one of the nicest guys you'll ever meet."

"I know."

"You do?"

"Sweetheart," Sherry said indulgently, "don't you think more goes on during practice than just basketball? Pete is a hoot...when you stuffy coaches aren't around, that is."

"I hate to break this to you, honey, but *you* are one of those stuffy coaches now."

Sherry grimaced. "Oh dang. I forgot about that."

"Listen to this..." Sherry and Pat were lying on the floor of the living room, using the bean bag chair as a backrest.

"I was born in Bannack, Montana Territory in 1878. My mother died giving life to me and my father gave me away a couple of days later. I never knew their names. But even with this inauspicious beginning to my life, I was raised in a loving home by two of the best mothers anyone could ever hope for."

"Mothers?"

"Yes," Sherry confirmed before continuing.

"My mothers' backgrounds were as diverse as two people's could be, but despite their differing upbringings they shared a love of life, of each other, and of their family that could not be dimmed no matter the obstacles they were forced to overcome. I write this memoir in their honor. May their love, courage, and determination never be forgotten."

Pat squirmed into a more comfortable position. She was lying between Sherry's legs, her head resting on the younger woman's stomach. "This should be interesting."

"Comfy?" Sherry asked as Pat adjusted and readjusted her position.

Finally satisfied, Pat rolled her eyes up to smile at Sherry. "You may continue."

"Brat." Sherry laughed, looking for her place on the page.

"Momma, Jennifer Stancey Kensington Branson, was born on the eastern seaboard into a prominent family that owned and operated a shipping company. Mommy, Jesse Marie Branson, was born in eastern Montana on my grandparents' cattle ranch. They met in the town of Sweetwater, fell in love, and the rest, as the saying goes, is history. Or it should be. My name is Charley Branson and this is my mothers' story as they told it to me."

Sherry continued to read until the fading daylight became so dim she could no longer see the words on the journal's pages.

"Wow," Pat said, pushing herself off the floor, "that's an amazing story. I never even thought about there being lesbians before now. I mean, I knew there were, but I just never thought what their lives must have been like. And to hear about the situations they had to overcome to stay together...Jesse and Jennifer must have been two very strong women."

"I would think that any women living on their own back then must have been very strong," Sherry agreed. She climbed to her feet and carried the journal to the kitchen counter. "I can't wait to read the rest of it."

"Me either." Pat patted her stomach. "But right now, I need food. Come on, I'll take you to dinner."

Comfortably seated in a restaurant, Sherry stirred cream into a cup of coffee. "Pat, do you think the places described in the journal are still around?" she asked.

"A lot of them are," Pat answered, looking out the window of the restaurant at a pair of mallards floating on the cold water of Rattlesnake Creek. She turned back to Sherry sitting beside her. "Let's see...Bannack is a state park now. Garnet, Coloma, Granite, Elk Horn are all ghost towns and in varying stages of falling apart. Philipsburg, Deer Lodge, Bozeman, Virginia City are still active cities, like Missoula."

"What about Sweetwater?"

"That's tougher." Pat took a sip of coffee as she remembered the journal passages Sherry had read earlier. "By how Charley describes it, Sweetwater should be someplace in the Bitterroot Valley, but I've never heard of it. In fact, I've never heard of a Sweetwater on this side of the Rockies. My best guess is that it was located in one of the side valleys and has been lost to history, like a lot of small towns from that time period."

"Do you think we could visit some of those other places?"

"Sure. I love exploring ghost towns. And with the descriptions in the journal to guide us, it would be fun to see if we can match any of the structures to what Charley tells of Jesse and Jennifer."

"When can we go?" Sherry asked, excited.

Pat looked out the window again. The creek was still partially covered in ice, and snow still lay on the river banks. "We can go to Philipsburg and Deer Lodge any time," she said. "They're on main highways. But some of the others, like Garnet and Granite, we'll have to wait until the snow melts and they reopen the roads. To get to them we have to travel on the original wagon roads, and they're not usually open or passable this time of year.

"What about Bannack?"

"It's open year round, but it's best to wait until the snow leaves the Big Hole."

"Which one is closest to Missoula?" Sherry asked. "Of the ones we can go see now."

"Philipsburg."

"Tomorrow?"

"We need food in the house, remember? Bare cupboards."

"Day after, then?"

"Need dishes and..." Pat thought for a moment. "How did you put it? 'Basic living essentials'."

"All right," Sherry countered. "In two days?"

"Need furniture."

Sherry glared. "Three days. But that's my last concession."

"Deal." Pat snickered. "Of course, I would have agreed to going tomorrow."

"You are in so much trouble," Sherry growled, throwing a balled up napkin at Pat, who tried to duck for cover but quickly discovered she had no place to hide.