

*Black Velvet Seductions*

Night Angel



Renee Reeves

*Sensuous Journeys*

**Renee  
Reeves**

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## ***Dedication***

To my husband Preston; for being supportive and working hard so that I could have the time to follow my dream (whether he likes the content of the book or not), and to my mother, Carole, for being the greatest mom in the world.

## Chapter 1

Keeping an eye on the sideview mirror and steady light pressure on the truck's gas pedal Nick smoothly backed the silver two-horse trailer into the small opening of the round pen. His brother, Jake, stood next to the corral fence, frowning and staring at the trailer. Each kick from the horse inside rocked the trailer side to side. Nick shifted the truck into park but kept his foot on the brake and then waved his arm out of the drivers' side window to get his brother's attention.

"He's not tied so when you open the door be ready to get the hell out of the way," he shouted.

Jake nodded, then squeezed between the fence and the trailer and Nick heard the harsh clangs of numerous locks being thrown. A loud squealing of metal hinges sounded, combining with the clattering of sharp hooves. The horse let out a high-pitched scream before jolting the trailer up and down as the animal lunged out of the trailer. Nick heard the trailer door slam shut and put the truck into drive, pulling the rig quickly away so Jake could close the corral gate. He pulled the truck and trailer around to the side of the barn, then came back to stand beside Jake, who stood with his elbows and one booted foot propped on the corral railing, watching with narrowed eyes as the horse careened around the enclosure.

"Jesus Christ, Nick." Jake's usually level voice was hard. "The bastard that did this should have been shot."

"Trust me, I was tempted."

"There's not an inch on him that's not scarred. Even his ears. How the hell did you get close enough to get the halter on him?"

Nick sighed, suddenly feeling very, very tired. "I tranqed him with the dart gun. Hated to do it, but it was the only way." He clucked and the big-boned quarter horse draft cross twitched his ears towards him. For a second Nick saw something soft flicker in the horse's eyes, but then it was gone and the madness was back. Lowering his head the horse charged to the center of the enclosure and struck out aggressively with both front legs.

"Looks like it's worn off though."

Jake snorted, watching the gelding's dramatic display. "Ya think?" He double checked the latch on the pen gate, "You've got your work cut out for you with this one, Nick, maybe more than you realize. I hope he's worth it."

Nick looked into huge brown eyes, seeing nothing but fear and distrust, but he also saw beneath the scars and misbehavior to the proud beauty the horse had probably been before he'd been bought and misused by a cruel owner.

"They're always worth it, Jake."

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The hairs on the back of Nick's neck prickled and he reined to a halt just outside of the hidden copse.

She was here again.

He exhaled silently, ignoring his now racing heart. Moving carefully he dismounted and ground tied his horse, knowing the abundance of grass would keep the animal quiet and satisfied. Stepping off the path he moved quickly to the shelter of a huge Hemlock tree and relaxed against its trunk, crossing his arms over his chest. The moon was full overhead but shadows cast by the enormous, low-hanging limbs would keep him hidden from her view. The low gurgling of the stream she sat beside would absorb any slight noise.

God she was beautiful.

Wrapped in a light-colored shawl because of the cool night she sat at the edge of his stream, knees drawn up to her chin, dangling a leafy vine in the water, completely oblivious to his presence. Thick dark hair trailed loosely down her back and Nick saw that a portion of it was trapped beneath her. Modern women just did not have hair like that, not without hundreds of dollars worth of styling help. Gut instinct told him that the gorgeous mass cascading to the ground was real. Nick could almost feel the silky-smooth texture of it trailing over his jaw and across his chest as her mouth moved down to his stomach, his abs...

Shit... He shifted slightly, trying to ease the sudden heaviness in his groin.

She sighed, turning her head slightly in his direction and resting her right cheek against her knees. Moonlight painted her skin so translucent it appeared lit from within. She had a fragile bone structure, sweet, very delicate features; high forehead, dark arching brows and eyes a color he couldn't make out... Full, sensuous lips had him clenching his jaw against a groan of intense longing.

She shivered and wrapped her shawl more tightly around her, but her small shoulders continued to tremble. Nick frowned; the thought of her being cold bothered him, although why he should care was beyond him. After all, she was trespassing on his land, invading his private domain.

And he didn't give a shit.

He wanted to take her in his arms. Share his body heat until both of them were burning.

The urge was insane. Coming out here in the middle of the night just to see her was insane.

*She walks in beauty, like the night...* The words popped into his mind, a poem he had heard once but damned if he remembered where or when. Most likely from a movie, since reading poetry was not high on his list of good times, although he had to admit that the line was certainly beautiful...like

her. Nick rolled his eyes at himself; waxing poetic at his age wasn't a very good sign.

Soft undulations reached his ears. Humming. She was humming, for Christ's sake. Low, slightly husky, the soothing rhythm floated to him, vaguely foreign sounding. Sort of like a lullaby. Leaning towards the stream she plucked a blade of grass from between two rocks and ran the tip of it around her open palm, following the outline of each finger with the slender blade. Long, slow, stroking caresses. Up, down, and around. His throat tightened and his fingers clenched tightly against the wave of lust that gripped him. He imagined her hands upon his skin, slowly caressing...and then her lips following their path downward...

Suddenly she froze, her hum cut off in midstream. The blade of grass fell forgotten to the ground as she subtly cocked her head to one side, listening.

Muscles tensing, Nick wrapped his palm around the hilt of his knife. He stood tense, ready for trouble until she finally relaxed and focused her gaze on something near the water. Soon he was able to see what had her attention. A black-crowned night heron had landed in the stream about thirty feet from where she sat, an unlucky fish dangling from his wet beak. She smiled at the bird, a truly genuine smile that dimpled her cheek and flashed small white teeth. Nick caught his breath— He wanted her smiling at him that way, pure, open and trusting. *Jesus! What the hell is wrong with me?* Now I'm jealous of a damn bird!

Spreading its wings the heron flew away to enjoy its prize and with childlike enthusiasm she busied herself digging in her pack, pulling out a sketchpad and pencil and beginning to draw by moonlight. The pencil moved quick and sure and Nick guessed she was capturing her memory of the bird while still fresh. He craned his neck, trying to get a glimpse of her drawing.

Oh Christ! His mouth went dry when in one of the most unintentionally seductive displays he had ever seen, she stood

and used both hands to massage her butt, arching her back and causing her breasts to thrust out against her shawl. Full and natural, they were more than enough to fill his hands and more than made up for her lack of stature. She might be small but she had more than enough to satisfy him. Her wetdream hair fell long and wavy down her back, past her thighs to almost touch the ground. Her soft appreciative sigh as the stretch loosened tight muscles reached him all the way across the clearing and he bit back a growl.

He wanted her now; soft and wet, stretched out naked in his bed, up against the wall; bent over a chair with her ass in the air, or hell, out here would do just fine too.

He sucked in a deep breath, knowing he was in deep shit when the flood gate of erotic images opened. When it came to her his body seriously outruled his brain, and if he had to endure much more of this torture he was definitely going to explode.

## Chapter 2

Morgan stood slowly, balancing herself with a palm against a nearby tree. Sweat beaded on her forehead and she groaned, biting her lip as her cramped and kinked muscles gave and stretched. Seeing the bird had been so exciting that she had forgotten to massage and stretch her leg, and had been sitting, caught up in sketching, for far too long. Hesitantly, afraid to move too suddenly, Morgan leaned back against the tree, glad for its rough support while she waited on her leg to relax and be able to take her weight. Finally the cramping eased and she could stand on her own. The walk home would be slow, especially since she had to carry her full backpack, and she dreaded the night to come. She bent to grab her pack, gasping as a sharp pain jerked her back upright. After a moment she tried again, this time successfully.

“Well,” she grumbled while adjusting the pack onto her shoulder, “you did it to yourself, Morgan. At least you have a few painkillers left.” The tiny pills were in the bottle on the nightstand beside her bed. She hadn’t taken one in over a week, preferring to just cope with the constant, dull ache in her hip and thigh, but tonight because of her overexertion she knew she would not be able to rest without them.

She sighed, absorbing the dark, glistening beauty of the stream and surrounding thicket of trees with their huge, weighted branches and thick egg-shaped cones. She loved it here. For some reason the place made her feel safe,

protected...embraced. Nothing could hurt her here.

She liked to pretend she had entered a long forgotten realm, one where time and reality ceased to exist and it was only her and the creatures of nature. It was a completely different world. One where her past did not matter and she was safe.

Safe. The word had been a mantra in her brain for a long time now. No more holding her breath and walking on tiptoes, dreading what would happen if that fourth stair squeaked and she woke him up. Finally she was alone and safe.

She glanced around; taking in the crumbling, moss covered faded grey bricks of a long abandoned wall behind her. Vines grew up the inside of it, reaching towards the bright moonlight overhead. It had been the first thing she had sketched when she had happened upon this place several nights ago during her walk. Everything had looked so beautiful that night, more...serene. She loved the quiet, the solitude, the moon's gentle light. Most people loved the sun, lived their lives in its shining rays and she had been no different...but that had been in her previous life. The life before her accident. Now...now she loved the night, with its concealing shadows and forgiving darkness.

Her cousin Lisa had been right in convincing her to find a new life for herself. Trying to escape the memories had caused her to move from Chicago to wide-open Montana. But leaving the memories behind had been impossible. There were still times when she woke up screaming from one of the nightmares, and the pain in her leg and hip were constant reminders. Not to mention her face. She had almost— but not quite— gotten over her hatred of mirrors. It was not their fault they told the truth. And one could never avoid the truth for long, no matter how hard they tried.

But at least she had her freedom and finally her own place.

Morgan smiled, remembering Lisa's excitement that night in Chicago when she had found the small cottage on the internet...

"It's absolutely perfect, Morgan! Look!"

“Just a second, the popcorn’s almost ready.” Morgan grabbed an ovenmit from the counter and then opened the microwave door, inhaling the strong aroma of freshly popped cheese popcorn.

“Come on!” Lisa called. “It even has a barn. You always wanted a horse.”

Morgan rolled her eyes and set the steaming container on the stool next to her cousin. “Yes, when I was seven and still believed in Santa Clause. I’ve grown up since then.” She sat down and watched as Lisa scrolled the mouse across the page, then clicked on a picture. At first all she saw were mountains broadcast against a bright blue sky... and then the picture finished loading.

“Oh...” she breathed, “it’s so beautiful...”

Lisa grinned, “Cheap too.”

Situated on four acres of land and surrounded by forest the small cream-colored cottage looked like something out of a children’s storybook. The three rail wood fencing looked on the verge of falling down, but the old barn behind the house looked in reasonably good condition. Morgan closed her eyes, picturing newly planted flowers under each of the windows, and maybe a swing hung from the roof of the front porch...the isolating woods would be filled with singing birds and she could sit forever and just listen...and sketch...

Lisa grabbed the phone off its cradle beside the computer and shoved it at her. “Call the realtor, right now, before someone else grabs this.”

Morgan glanced at the clock. Darn. “It’s after midnight, Lisa.”

“So? They have answering machines. Call and leave a message or I will.” Lisa pushed the phone into her limp hand and dialed the number on the screen. “Don’t let this pass you by Morgan, start living your dreams.”

And so after a long flight to see the property in person she had signed all of the paperwork. A week later she put her husband’s glass and steel monstrosity on the market, hired a

moving company, loaded her little Volvo station wagon to its limit and never looked back. Twelve-hundred miles and a load of worries and her dream had become reality.

A branch cracked, jerking Morgan back to the present. She glanced around but saw nothing but tree limbs moving with a slight breeze. She shivered, noticing that the temperature had dropped a few degrees and pulled her shawl more tightly around her shoulders.

She sighed deeply. Moving here had been her first grab at recovery, but she knew deep inside that she may never be fully healed; the trauma and humiliation ran way too deep. The knowledge that there were indeed evil people in the world had been made very clear to her, over and over again. And the things she had done...her throat tightened and she swiped at her eyes, wiping away the sudden tears that once started would go on until depression had her so weakened that she locked herself in her room, hiding away from her new life and letting him take control once more. She sucked in a big breath, held it for a moment and then exhaled slowly.

Wasted years, all of them.

Out of habit she pulled several thick pieces of hair over her shoulder until the right side of her face was covered then slowly limped to the path behind the stone wall and into the woods toward the trail home.

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“Heard Eliza Ramsey’s place was sold.”

Nick glanced up from the bin of nails. Ben, the owner of Grenners’ Feed and Hardware, the only hardware store in town, was standing beside him, an obvious question in his old blue eyes.

He shrugged his shoulders, knowing the old man was one step away from talking his ear off. “I guess, saw a moving truck there last week or so.”

“Come on, Nick. Ramsey’s place is right behind yours. How can you not be interested in what’s goin’ on or who’s goin’ to

live there?"

Nick sighed in irritation; he really did not need Ben hounding him this early in the morning. "First, it's none of my business; people come and go all the time and I could care less. Second, it's on the other side of my woods, completely out of view, so it's not like I'll have an immediate neighbor I have to associate with. And thank God for that." *Yeah right, Nick. Long dark hair, a 'take your sweet time and kiss me all over figure'...* One look from your new neighbor and you'd be standing on her front porch with roses in hand, hoping to do more than just 'associate'. Annoyed at his wayward thoughts Nick focused on the task at hand which was picking out the nails he would need to fix the board that Sultan had kicked out of the back wall of his stall. "You know as long as nobody messes with me I mind my own business."

"I know," Ben said, nodding. "I know. Too bad you moved to a town full of biddies and gossips." He shuffled out of Nick's way, using his cane to point down the aisle towards the back of the store. "By the way, got that new load of rubber pads if you need 'em."

"Yeah, thanks. I'll take a couple, just in case. It'll save me a trip back if he tears one up again." And keep me from having to drive past the Ramsey place, he thought to himself.

Ben grinned, hobbling along beside Nick as they made their way to the back wall. "Maybe you should put pads on that horse's hooves instead of the walls. I know they have somethin' like that out now, saw one in a magazine. How's Jake doin'? Ribs still botherin' him?"

Nick nodded, "Yeah, it's called a 'hoof boot' and they're not meant for leaving on the hoof permanently. It's more for medicinal treatment." He bent down and examined the rubber pads, pressing his fingers into the material to judge thickness and durability. "Jake's doing better, back to helping with the barn some. He's staying away from the pony for awhile though. He's convinced she's out to get him." Satisfied that the pads would do the trick Nick easily hefted one of the six-foot long,

seventy-five pound bulk packages onto his shoulder. "These pads might work out better anyway. He only acts up when I'm late feeding him."

They walked back to the front of the store where Ben rang up the purchases. "Okay, let's see. Fifty-five bags of horse feed, two bags of dog food, one carton of three-inch nails, one pack of rubber and a hose nozzle. Anythin' else?"

"Yeah, I almost forgot, throw in a bag of cat food. The barn cat finally had her kittens."

Ben shook his head, flashing gleaming dentures. "Total is two-hundred eighty-nine dollars and ninety-two cents. Nobody lookin' at you would ever believe you're such a softy."

Nick grimaced, giving the old man a pointed look. "Yeah, well do me a favor and keep it to yourself. I like my privacy. Keeps things smooth and quiet." He handed Ben three hundred dollars, then put the change in the back pocket of his blue jeans.

"I know that. You forget that I know your history, but too much privacy ain't good, Nick."

Nick's whole body tensed, every fiber of his being hating that his 'history' as Ben put it, had been brought up, but then Ben had known him for almost ten years and while others barely had the courage to look him in the face, Ben had never once been intimidated. In fact he was about the only person Nick would go so far as to call a friend.

"Get that look off you're face, Nick," Ben said, "you know I didn't mean anythin' by that."

"Yeah, well, in my opinion too many people are what's not good. I learned that lesson the hard way, and that's why I'm here."

Ben shook his head but kept his mouth shut, then just as quickly latched onto the previous topic. "Hey, let me know if you meet whoever bought the Ramsey place." Nick watched as Ben placed a gnarled hand over his heart in mock dismay. "That's about the most interestin' news an old man like me has to look forward too right now."

Nick sighed and rolled his eyes, then pulled his truck keys out of his pocket. "I'll pull over to the loading dock. Tell Chris I'll need his help securing the tarp." He hoisted the bulk rubber onto his shoulder again, then gathered the bag of cat food under his arm to protect it from the rain. "Thanks Ben."

"No problem. Say 'hi' to that brother of yours for me."

"Will do."

Before the old man could say another word he was out the door, striding quickly through the downpour.

### Chapter 3

Morgan came awake by degrees, dread lying like a cold stone in her stomach. She was always tense for those first few seconds before she realized where she was. A blurry-eyed glance at her surroundings instantly reassured her. The aged white walls in desperate need of paint were becoming increasingly familiar and the yellow oversized armchair with burgundy floral pattern sitting in the far corner was immediately comforting. It had been her mother's as was the antique French dresser across the room. Morgan sat up in bed, focusing on the two items and letting the well-loved pieces ground her to a past that only included her mother and that was warm and filled with loving memories.

She stretched, letting the feelings of freedom and independence loosen her muscles and relax her mind. Relief settled in. She was in Montana, not Chicago, and had awakened in the bedroom of her new home, not in her husband's. She had waved goodbye to the movers two weeks ago.

The bedside clock read six forty-six A.M; she had a doctor's appointment at ten-thirty for a checkup on her leg, and to renew her pain prescription. Crap! She hated meeting new doctors; hated having to pretend she didn't see the suspicious looks at her face, or the way they murmured and gestured to their associates when they were in the hallway and thought she couldn't see them. The worst was having to try to explain if they asked how she had been scarred...it never stopped

and always managed to make her feel low, like her disfigurement somehow made her less of a person. Why couldn't they just take a look at her, examine her leg and hip, and give her their usual advice, which she already knew backwards and forwards. Stretches, massages, daily aspirin, use a cane if she needed, more checkups and to take her pain meds only when the pain became intense. That was all they could do for her and after months of painful physical therapy both she and the doctors knew it. There was no changing the fact that she would always be partially crippled.

But at least she had survived. Morgan constantly told herself that was all that mattered. Not looks, not material things, and definitely not men. No way. Not ever again. Men were sly, brutal animals...no, no, she shouldn't think that. Men were much worse than any animal could be.

Not that any would want her even if she was interested. By now she was used to 'the looks'—as she had come to think of them—and tried not to let them hurt her. But it was definitely hard to deal with. People were naturally mean, critical and judgmental, especially when someone was different. The killer had been when people had started quickly looking the other way when she happened to look at them...and then she noticed that no one would look her in the eyes anymore. Several times she had toyed with the idea of putting a gun to her head just so she would no longer be in the world and those people—the ones that treated her like a side-show freak—could get on with their lives. Luckily Lisa had stepped in with the idea of her moving away from everything, hence the fresh start out here where there were fewer people and more open space. She had no direct neighbors except for the large farm across the woods, access to the internet and TV allowed her to shop from home if she preferred, and she only had to go out when she felt like it or when she had an appointment, such as today.

She sighed in resignation, knowing that she had to get her butt moving. The trip into the neighboring city would take at

least an hour and a half, and then she had to allow herself time to find the doctor's office.

Throwing the sheet back she carefully swung her legs over the side of the bed and tentatively put weight on her bad leg. These first few minutes always told her how the day would go. When all she felt was a slight pull she let out a relieved sigh. Grabbing up her yellow robe from the back of the armchair she shrugged into it and moved to pull up the wooden blinds covering her huge picture window. Her reflection, all pale skin and shadowed eyes, stared back at her while rain splattered heavily against the glass and ran in rivulets along the pane.

Crying...Her fingers came up, trembling as they traced the tears on the glass. So much time spent crying... Thunder rumbled, shaking the small cottage and then lightning flashed, streaks of yellow and white striking deadly and to the point in her field; she jumped, startled back into the present.

Morgan dropped the blind back down, knowing that the storm was not going to let up anytime soon and dreading having to go out in it. Crawling back into bed, safe and snug under the covers sounded so much better, and she would have if she hadn't needed to renew her darn pain prescription.

Turning away from the window she moved slowly across her bedroom to the small adjoining bathroom. She was proud of her place, even though the walls were ugly and discolored and the who-knew-how-old wallpaper was peeling off in various rooms, it was still all hers. A pang of sorrow jolted her and she blinked back tears. Her mother would have loved it here, and Morgan would have loved having her here to help fix it up. More tears tightened her throat, the ache so bad she could barely swallow.

Not now, Morgan. Biting her lip she hurried into her bathroom and started running water for a bath, adding a good amount of Epson salt and fragrance to the warm water. The bathroom was next on her mile-long list of projects, and she couldn't wait to find time to go to the huge expo she had seen

signs for. Her husband would have had a fit if she had tried to bring items from a flea market, or any secondhand store, into their home. It had been only the newest and most expensive modern furniture for him, hand-picked by an even more expensive designer.

Cold, hard furnishings that suited her husband's cold, hard demeanor.

Morgan had hated every single piece in the house.

Shuddering she looped her hair up on the top of her head and secured the heavy mass with several clips, then sank down into the almost full tub, sighing deeply as the warm water seeped into her muscles. Morgan loved taking long hot baths, but this morning was not the time to dally and so she scrubbed quickly and thoroughly before climbing out and toweling off. Spending as brief amount of time as possible looking at her reflection, she applied heavy concealer to her cheek and color to her eyes and lips. The camouflage wouldn't fool a close look by a doctor, but it did help her avoid being scrutinized by the unfailingly rude public.

Leaving the bathroom, she chose a white t-shirt and loose jeans from the closet, then pulled on her low-heeled supportive boots. The reinforced arches helped buffer the strain on her leg and she preferred them when she wasn't sure how much walking she would have to do. Making her way down the hall she tucked in her shirt and grabbed an umbrella and light rain jacket out of the front hall closet, along with her purse. Taking her keys off the hook by the front door she stepped out onto her porch and locked the door behind her.

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Dr. Bessick had been nice enough, and not easily fooled. Morgan had sat through the usual questioning; what types of exercises was she doing? How often did she need to take her pain medication? Had there been any worsening of pain? How long ago had the accident happened... and Morgan had answered them as she always did; with lies. Or, as she preferred

to think of it, an altering of the truth. She was under no illusion that Dr. Bessick had believed her, but at least the female doctor had been less intrusive than most. She had simply examined her and seen no new injuries to be concerned about; only the older ones that had healed over as best they could and Morgan had honestly assured her that she now had nothing to worry about. She had left with a renewed prescription, an appointment for three months from today, and a special cream that the doctor said might help diminish her scarring a little.

There was always room for cautious hope.

Rain pelted her umbrella and soaked her boots as Morgan hurriedly unlocked her car and tossed her purse onto the passenger seat, then scrambled in, shaking and closing her umbrella after her. The storm had yet to diminish and she wanted nothing more than to get home and curl up in front of her TV or with a good book to wait out the remnants.

Pulling out of the parking lot she passed a McDonald's on her left and, as if on cue, her stomach rumbled, reminding her that it was half past one o'clock and she had yet to eat anything. Since her husbands 'lessons', food had never been high on her priority list and she had a tendency to keep herself in a mild state of hunger. It was unconsciously habitual and something she was definitely trying to change, but her husband had been an effective teacher and she a very quick learner. He had made it clear in more ways than one that he wanted her thin and that she had damn well better get thin and stay that way. Or else.

A thin line of sweat broke out over her forehead. It had not taken her long to become extremely familiar with the 'or else' part.

*Stop it. He can't hurt you now. He's dead, Morgan.*

Her knuckles whitened on the steering wheel and she drew in a deep breath, releasing it very slowly. Yes, he was. She had claimed the body herself and made all of the funeral arrangements. But memories were powerful and at times it

seemed that his hold was just as strong from the grave as it had been when he had lived. God knew she woke up in a cold sweat often enough.

Turning the wipers on high she slowly drove through town, slow enough that even with the rain she noticed things she hadn't before, like the buildings that were made of huge timber logs, just as they would have been back in the old west, situated amongst larger stone and brick structures. Trees lined the walkways and on sunny days would provide shade to people browsing the boardwalk storefronts. There were signs directing tourists to the local 'watering holes' and hotels, and signs for the upcoming rodeos, festivals and annual celebrations of just about everything the population could think of.

Even on a thoroughly soaking day like today the town was quaint and beautiful. Stopping for a red light, Morgan sat nibbling on her bottom lip. On green, she pulled her car into a parking area and grabbed her digital camera from the glove box, then locked her purse in the space vacated by the camera. Then she opened the car door and shook open her umbrella. Camera ready, she made her way through the rain and across the road, dodging puddles here and there until she reached the covered boardwalk. She leaned her umbrella against a wall and started snapping pictures.

An hour later the camera was full and she was feeling surprisingly revitalized. Her mind drifted back over some of the images she had captured, like the one she caught of a young cowboy dressed head to toe in a slicker riding his soaked horse down the middle of Main Street. It would make a great subject for one of her paintings. She'd blushed when he caught her photographing him and tipped his hat and had been half afraid that he would ride over to her— and coward that she was— she'd smiled shyly and turned away to start snapping shots of the cloud shrouded hills in the background. Her cousin would be thrilled with a series of paintings based on Montana. Lisa had been hounding her to start some new

paintings for several upcoming gallery shows and now Morgan had the perfect subject.

After putting away her camera, Morgan browsed several shops while waiting for the rain to lessen and ended up buying several unnecessary souvenirs, plus munching on two hamburgers. Finally, after two hours of waiting and wandering, Morgan was exhausted and her leg was starting to spasm. She could feel the dull prickling of pain starting in her hip; on top of that, she knew she still had the hour and a half drive home before she could relax in a warm tub. Limping slowly along the wooden walkway she sighed in relief when she spotted her car and was finally able to climb inside and relax against the supple leather seats. After starting the car she turned the air on, letting it cool the humid interior while she massaged her aching muscles. Dealing with the small pinpricks was easy enough; it was the bigger, cramping spasms she knew were coming that were killers and she prayed to God she could make it home before those came.

Gritting her teeth, Morgan shifted the car into reverse and pulled out of the parking lot into traffic. Once hitting the highway she rolled the driver's side window down, letting in the sharp, crisp mountain air.

Even though pain was now dulling her pleasure, she had not felt this alive—this free—in over six years.

The wind brought in sharp droplets of rain and blew her hair in all directions, wildly whipping the long dark strands, almost making them seem alive, like Medusa with her tangled head of snakes. Morgan laughed at the image, feeling a kinship to the poor woman and on impulse rolled down all of the car's windows so that gusts of damp air came from all directions.

This...this was living.