



Portrait
of the
Past



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To Laura Joy,
for the beginning;

And to all the Valley Dwellers,
for the finishing

Chapter 1

San Diego, California: 1880

Marguerite always arrived early on market day. She had no booth, only a small awning to protect her customers from the hot southern sun. Two chairs, a small table. Her quick, coffee-colored hands (*coffee and cream*) laid out the tools of her trade. Oval disks of sanded ivory, bits of velvet ribbon. A drawing pad, pastels, fine tipped brushes, paint.

She studiously ignored the mutters of a few of the other early risers. Some would like to drive her from the market, she knew. But hers was a luxury item – no competition for the farm goods and crafts of the others. Still, she was colored, and that was enough for some. Her sex offered her some protection, it seemed. Even the most profound bigot scrupled to harass a woman alone. At least here, in front of others.

She set out her samples, lingering over one miniature portrait, painted long ago. A girl she would never see again, nor did she wish to. She wondered why she kept it - not for sentimental reasons, certainly. Well, it was a good likeness. She put the miniature in its stand, and sat down with her knitting to await her customers.

Market days were usually slow - she generally had better custom setting up near the docks when the ships were in, but sometimes a vacationer or one of the many who came to this southern seashore for its healing effects would stop by. It was an outmoded sort of remembrance she fashioned, but one still desired by many. Some.

A woman walked through the market, shopping basket hanging on her arm. She paused a few steps away from Marguerite's awning, looking thoughtful, and Marguerite took the moment to examine her with an artist's eye. Dark, wiry hair, only partly contained in the net that secured it, skin darkened by the sun, but not recently - the crow's feet around the bespectacled eyes were earned. Marguerite would have taken her for a farmer's wife if not for the elegant, if somewhat casual attire. A vacationer, then, but not of the usual sort. Marguerite found herself intrigued and

offered an uncharacteristic smile. The woman smiled warmly back and approached the table. "These are lovely, so vibrant," she said. "How long does it take?"

"About an hour of your time, a day or two of mine," Marguerite replied. "Would you like one for your. . ." she almost said "husband", but noted the large sapphire ring the woman wore on her left hand - no wedding band, so she corrected herself, "...sweetheart?"

The woman frowned thoughtfully. "Maybe. It might make a nice wedding present. I've been wondering what I could possibly give him that he doesn't already have."

"You're getting married soon?"

The woman nodded, turning sparkling green eyes on Marguerite. "In June - when school is out. I'm a teacher, you see."

Something about this woman both intrigued and repelled Marguerite - the sparkling eyes, the easy manner, but the aversion? Then she realized - the woman had a slight accent. Marguerite tamped down her distaste. After all, not everyone from the South. . .

"Yes," the woman interrupted Marguerite's thoughts, "I want one." She sat down in the chair opposite. "How much?"

Marguerite sized her up - whatever the market would bear. "Thirty dollars."

"Oh, dear," the woman said. "I don't have that much with me. I could come back later?"

"No need," Marguerite said. "A small deposit will do."

"All right," the woman agreed. She opened her purse and handed Marguerite a ten dollar gold piece. "Is this enough?"

She didn't even haggle. Maybe I should have asked for more. Marguerite put the coin in her pocket and shrugged. She was already charging three times her usual price, best not to be too greedy. "Yes, of course." She took up the pad and opened the box of pastels.

"Wait," the woman said, tugging off her hair net. The wiry curls cascaded over her shoulders, down her back. "Clay likes me with my hair down."

I shouldn't wonder. Marguerite was arrested for a moment herself. "Of course." She took up a dark pastel. "Miss. . .?"

"Oh, I haven't introduced myself, have I?" The woman tossed back her head and laughed. "Molly Holt." She offered her hand.

"Marguerite Dumas," Marguerite responded, taking the proffered hand.

Molly's eyes lit up. "Dumas? Like the author?"

"Yes, but I'm no relation." Marguerite quickly began sketching. "You're from Kentucky," she said before she could stop herself.

"You can tell? Most people tell me I've lost all my accent - it's been so long since I left home."

"A mere trace, and I have a good ear," Marguerite said, flushing.

"So what is a Frenchwoman doing all the way out here in San Diego?" Molly asked.

"Oh, I came to see your beautiful country," Marguerite said. *It's not wholly a lie.* "But I caught pneumonia in Colorado, and had to come here for my health."

Molly's brows knit in concern. "Oh, dear. Are you quite recovered?"

"Quite recovered," Marguerite assured her. "In need of money for my travels, but quite well, thank you. What brings you here?"

Molly shifted in her chair, then stopped. "I'm sorry, I should sit still, shouldn't I?"

"No," Marguerite said. "I can better capture you if you act naturally. If I need you to hold still, I will ask you."

Molly smiled. "Oh, well then. I'm not good at being still. But as to what brings me here - Clay and I were down visiting his sister, but he got called back to Modesto on a case. He's a lawyer, you see."

"He abandoned you?"

"I wouldn't say that," Molly frowned. "He's very conscientious. Like my first husband." She thought a moment. "You probably don't know what the Underground Railroad was, do you?"

Marguerite started. "Yes, I do. They aided slaves to escape, before the War."

Molly nodded. "Henry, my husband, would be gone for days, sometimes weeks at a time, and I wouldn't know where he was or when he was coming back."

"Did you help him?"

"Sometimes," Molly said, "but I was only seventeen when we married, and he tried to keep me out of it. We had to hide people in our cellar a few times - not that I begrudge it, I wish he'd let me do more. Slavery was an abomination - I'd have liked to have had more of a hand in stopping it."

Marguerite sketched in silence for a few moments. Her heart was pounding in her chest, yet she found she could not let the subject drop. "What happened to him?"

"Killed in The War," Molly said sadly.

"I'm sorry," Marguerite said. "I shouldn't have asked."

"It's all right," Molly said. "It was a long time ago." She inhaled deeply. "And here I am, about to begin a new life, after all this time." She touched the lines around her eyes. "Although I don't know what Clay sees in me. He could have any woman he wanted."

Marguerite looked down at her sketches. "Perhaps I can show you."

"No flattering portrait can countermand what I see in the mirror every morning," Molly said. "I know I'm plain. And I just turned forty."

"A good portrait can reach below the surface," Marguerite said.

"So I've heard," Molly said. She smiled. "You may try, but a good likeness is all I'm paying you for."

"I shall," Marguerite said. She gathered up her drawings. "Come back day after tomorrow and I should have it ready for you."

"You paint from sketches?" Molly asked, surprised.

"Don't worry," Marguerite said. "I have an excellent visual memory." *Too vivid a memory.* "This is how I work."

"All right then," Molly said, standing and offering her hand again. "Day after tomorrow then."

Marguerite gathered up her things, took down her awning and made her way back to the rooming house she occupied. She washed up, then sat down, gazing at the blank ivory circle that was her canvas. She sighed and picked up her brush.

"You may be a painter, mon cherie, but you will never be an artiste."

Marguerite's head snapped up - it was almost as though she could hear Armand's words, spoken years ago.

"I'm the best student at the atelier," Marguerite protested. "Monsieur Pierre says so."

"The best painter," Armand repeated, "but your heart, it is cold. Nothing touches your canvas but paint. There is no fire. I love you too much to lie to you, mon amour."

"But not enough not to insult me," she pouted.

Armand took her hand. *"Marguerite, my little daisy, I have tried to ignite the flame of love in your heart, but to no avail. You do not love, you do not hate. There is no passion in you at all."*

"I do love you," she protested. "You know I do."

"You do not," he insisted. "You love nothing, not even yourself. You should go home - perhaps there you may find what you need. It is not here - you have been in Paris long enough to have found it if it were."

"I have no home," she said. "I never did."

Armand tutted. *"Everyone has a home. You must find it. Then, perhaps, you may become what you wish to be. Not before."*

Marguerite's hand trembled. She put down her brush, shook her head to clear it, then resolutely took up her brush again. Now was not the time for such doubts - she had a commission to fulfill.

She filled her mind's eye with Molly's green eyes and began to paint.

She sat back, unsatisfied. She dipped the miniature in her bucket, washing it clean, prepared to start over. She contemplated her sketches, seeing her subject again in her mind's eye. No simple daub was going to satisfy, not for this subject. She wet her brush and dipped it in burnt umber, washing the color over the ivory. Chiaroscuro - it was a painstaking technique, one she had not used for years, but this time. . . well, perhaps thirty dollars was not too much to ask, after all.

She felt a frenzy seize her. She painted all night, layering wash after wash across her oval. Burnt umber and sepia for the skin, emerald for the eyes, blue-black and violet for the hair. Her lamp was sputtering when she finished - she extinguished it and got up to open the drapes. She picked up the miniature by the edges and examined it critically. Yes, she had done it. She nodded in satisfaction, then frowned to herself. What was it about this woman that excited such strong feelings? She knit her brow. Something. . . she could not catch it, though she tried, in vain. She sighed and put the miniature back in its holder to dry before she applied the clear lacquer that would protect the colors.

She glanced over at her bed - she should sleep since she had been up all night - but found it particularly unappealing. No need to go to the docks, she had plenty of money. She took up her sketchbook, her pastels and her hat and made her way down to the seashore.

She walked along the sands, climbed over the rocks, looking for a vista to draw, but she could not settle. Armand's assessment was fresh in her mind - she shuddered. It was not true that she could not feel, it was only true that she tried not to. Emotion had never brought her anything but agony, but it was certain that something was stirring in her now, and she did not know why. She wasted several hours in these ruminations, her mind running in circles like a mouse on a wheel. Finally, she returned to her room.

The painting was thoroughly dry, and as she carefully lacquered it, she contemplated the likeness once more. Molly looked out at her, the image full of warmth and good humor. It was good, the best work she had done in years. The question that haunted her was, "Why?"

She threw herself on her bed and tossed and turned for a few hours until dinnertime, when she realized she had eaten nothing yet that day. This was unlike her, she'd always been of strong appetite. She sighed and went out for dinner, returning only to find a fitful sleep until the morrow.

She arrived early at the market, setting up her awning but not bothering to set out her samples. She sat down with her knitting and found that the rhythm of the needles calmed her admirably. As she saw Molly scurrying toward her, she was able to present her usual serene demeanor.

"Is it done?" Molly asked excitedly.

"Yes," Marguerite said, opening the pasteboard box she had stored the miniature in, carefully cushioned with cotton wool.

Molly gasped. "Oh, my, it's exquisite. You flatter me."

"Not at all," Marguerite assured her. "I hope I have captured you."

Molly took the box and examined the painting more closely. "Well, it's a thing of beauty, anyway," she smiled. "I do believe you've outdone yourself."

"I do believe I have," Marguerite agreed, returning Molly's smile. She had known it was good, but still Molly's praise warmed her.

Molly reached into her purse, took out a twenty dollar gold piece and handed it to Marguerite. "Wait," she said, rummaging in her purse and taking out another five. "I think you deserve a bonus."

Marguerite looked at the coin hungrily, then pushed Molly's hand away. "No," she said, "I've already charged you far more than I usually do. I'm well-paid. Go have it mounted - there's a jeweler in town who does excellent work."

Molly shrugged and noted the down the address Marguerite gave her. "Thank you," she said. "This will be a most excellent wedding gift."

"Best wishes," Marguerite said. "I hope you shall be very happy."

"I shall," Molly assured her, offering her hand. "It was very nice to meet you. I wish you well."

"Thank you," Marguerite said.

Molly took her miniature and departed. Marguerite watched her go, still wondering what about her had roused Marguerite so, but doubted she would ever know.

Chapter 2

San Diego, 1880

Marguerite went about her old habits - selling her miniatures on the docks and in the market. She never again painted as she had for Molly, and she did not try, doing her best to push that experience to the back of her mind. Her little nest egg grew slowly, but surely.

Roughly six weeks later, she was approached by a young woman accompanied by two children. The woman's elegant attire spoke of money, her long-legged gait spoke of someone accustomed to riding horses: money and horses - Marguerite pegged her as belonging to one of the wealthy ranches that dotted California. The children were a puzzle - they were ten or twelve years old and the woman seemed no older than twenty-two. The boy was dark-haired and -eyed, the girl redheaded and fair, both contrasting with the young woman's golden curls and large blue eyes.

The woman turned to the two children, handing them her shopping basket and a list. "You two go do the shopping while I speak with this lady," she said, indicating Marguerite. "I've written down what things should cost, so don't let anyone cheat you."

"No, Miss Rory," the boy said, grinning, "we won't."

The woman smiled at them, then turned to Marguerite, offering her hand. "Miss Dumas?"

"Yes?" Marguerite said, taking it.

"I'm Aurora Palmer. You painted a miniature for my brother's fiancée, Molly Holt, a few weeks ago. Do you remember?"

Marguerite felt no surprise - she had been half expecting that shoe to drop, and here it was. "Yes, I remember. Is everything satisfactory?"

"Oh, yes," Aurora smiled. "My brother has sent me with another commission, if you're interested."

"I'm always interested," Marguerite replied. "What does he have in mind?"

"Do you paint portraits? I mean, full-size portraits?"

"Not for several years," Marguerite said. "But yes, I have, of course." Her heart began to pound, and she unconsciously put her hand to her chest.

"Clay simply adored the miniature of Molly, and he would like you to paint their wedding portrait, if you're available."

"He's seen it already?" Marguerite asked, wondering why she picked at the inconsequential.

"Molly was so pleased with it, she couldn't wait to give it to him," Aurora explained. "Would you come to dinner, and we can discuss the terms? We're staying at my family's beach cottage. I'm not the world's best cook, but I promise not to poison you."

Marguerite smiled. "Of course you won't. I'd be happy to come."

"Good." Aurora gave her directions and the time, then rejoined the children who had finished their shopping.

Marguerite contemplated. It seemed that the God she no longer loved was conspiring to send her to a place she had no desire to go. She pressed her lips together in a grim smile. God wanted to trifle with her, after all this time, did He? She dared Him to try.

She would take that commission, if it was at all profitable, and she was sure it would be. Let God do His worst - she was ready for Him.

She put on her best dress and pinned her best hat atop her carefully coiffed hair. The Palmer cottage was a mere mile or so from her rooming house, so she walked the distance, her chin lifted defiantly.

Aurora Palmer stood on the porch, barefoot, attired in rolled-up denim trousers and a pink shirt knotted at the waist. "Hello," she greeted Marguerite with a smile. She cupped her hands around her mouth and called loudly, "John! Emily! Time to come in!" She took in Marguerite's attire. "I suppose we'd better dress for dinner."

"No, don't bother," Marguerite said as the children ran along the beach toward the cottage. "You're on holiday. Don't dress up for me, Miss Palmer."

"Not holiday, exactly," Aurora said, "and call me 'Rory' - everyone does. I should have thought of it before - it's been so long since we had company, except for the family. But if you don't mind - we won't be here much longer and I want the children to enjoy what time we have left."

"Of course, don't give it another thought," Marguerite said as the children arrived.

"Say 'hello' to Miss Dumas," Rory commanded, "then wash up at the pump and come in to dinner."

"Hello," the children said cheerily as they headed around the cottage to the pump at the back.

"Come on in," Rory said, opening the door for Marguerite. She slid her feet into a pair of slippers, then led Marguerite into a small parlor. "Please, sit down. Would you like a drink? Tea, perhaps? We have ice if you'd like it cold."

Ice tea sounded refreshing after her warm walk. "Yes, please, that would be lovely." Marguerite took the opportunity to gaze around the parlor as Rory went to fetch the tea - three doors opened off the room, two at the back, evidently the bedrooms, and the door that Rory had vanished through, obviously the kitchen. The room was well and comfortably furnished - clean, if not altogether tidy. Books, papers and drawings lay scattered about in a welcoming tumble. Certainly a room for living in.

Rory returned with two glasses of tea on an enameled tray. Marguerite heard the two children laughing and splashing at the pump. "Nice children," she remarked, taking her glass and sipping it. "Yours?"

Rory laughed. "Heavens, no! I'm not nearly old enough. They belong to the orphanage where Molly works."

Marguerite raised her eyebrows. "Oh, I didn't know."

"She didn't tell you?"

"We didn't discuss it," Marguerite said. "We didn't really have that much time to talk."

Rory nodded understanding. "There was a scarlet fever outbreak there a few months ago. My mother and brothers went to help with the nursing, but I couldn't, as I've never had scarlet fever. I had to stay home and run things at our ranch," she said with a sigh.

"Which I'm sure your family greatly appreciated," Marguerite said.

"I guess," Rory said, "but I wanted to do *something* to help, so when it was over, I offered to bring Em and John, who were the sickest, down here to complete their recovery."

"They certainly seem healthy now," Marguerite observed.

Rory smiled. "They are. The doctor says we can go home as soon as it's warm enough back in Modesto, so we should be leaving in two or three weeks. It's been fun, but it will be good to get back home."

Emily and John tumbled in the door then, laughing and still damp from the pump. "Don't want to go home!" John chimed, catching Rory's last remark.

"I do," Emily said. "I miss all my friends. I'm glad we came, but I'll be glad to get home, too."

John frowned at this. "Ah, well, I guess you're right. As long as we don't have to go right away."

"Which we don't," Rory said, standing. She led the way into the kitchen, where the meal was spread out on the table. "It's just some cold steamed crab and salad - it's too hot for hot food, if you don't mind."

"Sounds perfect," Marguerite said.

"I caught the crab," John said proudly.

"Found it in a tide pool," Emily corrected.

"I still had to catch it, didn't I?" John said defiantly.

"Yes, you did," Rory said, "and we all appreciate it. Marguerite, if you'll sit here, next to me," Rory indicated, "and Emily, would you please say grace."

Marguerite bowed her head along with everyone else, although she certainly did not pray.

The food was good, simple and refreshing, and decidedly not poisonous. After dinner, Rory dismissed the children to play on the beach. "Only until sunset," she warned, "then you have to come in and finish your lessons. And don't turn your back on the ocean."

"You say that every time," John complained good-naturedly. "We remember."

"See that you do," Rory smiled. She turned to Marguerite. "It's a nice evening to sit on the porch and watch the sunset, if you'd like."

"All right," Marguerite agreed, following her out to the porch and seating herself in the proffered rocking chair while Rory sat on the porch rail, stretching out her long legs in front of her.

"Well," Rory said, "Down to business, I guess. The wedding is the first of June. How long will it take you to paint a portrait?"

"Depends on the size, and the subject."

"Well, of course it will include both my brother and Molly," Rory said. "Clay thought it should be about three feet by four."

"No animals or props?" Marguerite asked. "He doesn't have a favorite dog he wants included?"

Rory laughed. "No, why?"

Marguerite shrugged. "Some people do. In that case, four to six weeks ought to do."

Rory nodded. "It's the middle of March now, so if you go up the middle of April, that should give you enough time. That should also give you enough time to buy supplies and finish up whatever projects you have here. That reminds me - wait just a moment." She hopped down off the rail and went into the cottage, returning in a few moments carrying a small reticule. "Clay wanted me to give you an advance to buy supplies with." She shook out a few coins and offered them to Marguerite. "Is a hundred dollars enough to start?"

Much more than enough. Marguerite's eyes grew wide but she was too stunned to do anything but nod. Rory handed her five twenty-dollar gold pieces, the coins weighing heavy in her hand. She had never earned so much at once.

"Now as to your price," Rory said, "Clay said I could go as high as five hundred."

Marguerite laughed nervously. "You're a very poor negotiator to give away your bargaining position like that," she observed.

Rory shrugged. "We have plenty of money; it's never been our way to short shrift people."

"It's a wonder you do have so much, then."

"Well, the West was completely open when my parents came here," Rory said. "They had to fight for what they earned, but they didn't do it by abusing people. Father always thought the way to get the best workers was to offer the best wages, and he was right. 'You get back what you give away,' he always said, and I've never known him to be wrong about that." She grew sober for a moment. "At least, not until he was killed."

"How?" Marguerite asked quietly.

"You don't know?" Rory asked. "I thought everyone around here knew how Barclay Palmer died."

"I'm not from here," Marguerite said.

Rory shook her head. "No, of course you aren't. Forgive me. Well," she shifted uncomfortably, "in addition to our family businesses, Father was elected to the State Senate a couple of years before he died. He was working on legislation to rein in the railroads, as well as to end child labor and grant equal rights to the Chinese workers. He was gunned down on the street in Sacramento - his killer has never been caught, but it's obvious that it was a political murder."

"I'm so sorry," Marguerite said, her stomach clenching.

"Thank you," Rory said. "It's been five years and it still seems fresh, sometimes." She shook her head. "But back to you - will five hundred be enough?"

"Yes," Marguerite said. She paused, then said sincerely, "I'll certainly try to make it worth that much to you."

"I'm certain you will. Molly showed me the miniature - it was quite a work of art. If you can do the same on a larger scale, we'll all be very happy."

The sun was beginning to set, so the children returned from their explorations. Rory excused herself for a moment to settle them to the day's schoolwork, returning a few moments later carrying a pair of leather-bound journals. She lit a lamp that hung beside the porch rail. "Would you mind giving me your artistic opinion about something?" she asked.

"Not at all," Marguerite replied, prepared to flatter this wealthy patron for all she was worth. She opened the first journal, but sat nonplussed for a moment, unable to tell just what she was looking at.

"It's a sea anemone," Rory supplied. "I've been drawing the tide pools. It's not very good, is it?"

The drawing now resolved itself, and Marguerite turned the pages, filled with similar drawings of anemones, limpets, crabs and other creatures she had seen but did not know the names of. Many of the pages had notes alongside the drawings, written in a pretty feminine hand.

"No, actually, they're rather good. You might want to take some drawing instruction, but you certainly have ability," Marguerite said sincerely.

"There's a Natural History Society here in San Diego," Rory said. "I've been to a few meetings, and a couple of the young men there have taught me and helped me with my observations."

Marguerite glanced at the girl's golden head and sweet face and smiled to herself.

Rory swept her arm out toward the ocean. "I'm so drawn to that," she explained. "There's so much about it we don't know; we're barely dabbling at the edges of it at the moment."

Marguerite considered her with more seriousness now. "You're saying you want to be a scientist?"

Rory nodded. "I haven't been to college yet. I've been waiting until I knew what I wanted." She hugged the journals closer. "I'll have to talk to my family about it first, of course, when I get home."

"Will they make difficulties for you?"

Rory shook her head. "Of course not. Both my parents were big supporters of education. My mother has founded three schools. It's just that - " she gazed out over the ocean, "well, I've been rather spoiled. I'm afraid they might not take me seriously."

"I would have said you were completely unspoiled," Marguerite said.

Rory laughed. "Thank you. I've grown up a lot the few months I've been down here, I think. Taking care of the children has been fun, but it's also been a big responsibility. I'm the youngest, you see. The younger of my two brothers is ten years older than I am, and I'm the only girl. Father, especially, doted on me." Her eyes clouded for a moment. "But I know what I want to do with my life now. I'm sure they'll support me once I convince them I'm serious."

"If it's what you love, then of course you should pursue it. With all your heart," Marguerite said, well aware of the hypocrisy of her words.

"Thank you," Rory said. "I shall. Oh dear, I've kept you past dark. Would you like me to see you home?"

"No need, you'd only have to come back in the dark, too. I'm used to these streets. I'll be all right."

"All right, then," Rory said, not arguing. She handed Marguerite a small slip of paper and shook her hand. "Here's Clay's address in case you need to telegraph him directly. Do pay us another call when you have the chance."

Marguerite nodded and said, "I will," but as she walked away she knew that she would not.

Chapter 3

Modesto, 1880

FTrue to Marguerite's belief, she did not go back. She bought her paints, canvas, brushes and other necessities and set to work. It had been years since she had painted a proper portrait, and she was uneasy about this commission, but she set to with a will. She used part of her advance to hire one of her fellow roomers as a model, a not-yet-faded dance hall girl, and gave her as much attention as she would have a fine lady in a mansion. The girl was flattered by the result, and although it did not approach the heights Marguerite had reached with Molly's miniature, it was with an increased confidence that Marguerite set out for Modesto on the thirteenth of April.

There was no railroad line to San Diego yet, so it was a long stagecoach ride to Los Angeles, then a much swifter and more comfortable rail journey to Modesto. As she got off the train, she was greeted by a tall, strongly-built man. "Miss Dumas?"

"Yes," she said, offering her hand. "You're Mr. Palmer?"

"Alex Palmer," the man agreed. "My brother Clay asked me to pick you up - he's tied up in court. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all," Marguerite said. "It's most kind of you." She had been somewhat confused - Molly had said her fiancé was a lawyer, but this man was pure cowboy, from his hat to the worn boots on his large feet. He even smelled like a cowboy, as Marguerite noted when he offered her his arm to assist her along the platform. Not that she objected; not in the least. She had known the Palmers were ranchers, but she had assumed they were gentleman ranchers. She was pleased to learn the contrary.

There was a surrey and a buckboard loaded with supplies waiting in front of the station, attended by another cowboy. "Give Pedro here your baggage tickets, and he'll take your luggage out to the ranch for you," Alex instructed her. "We'll be picking up Molly on the way - your things might even arrive ahead of us."

She handed over her tickets, and Alex handed her up into the surrey as Pedro tipped his hat and went off to collect her baggage. As they drove down the street, Alex pointed out the courthouse,

an unimposing wood frame building. Indeed, Modesto itself was singularly unimposing. Like many Western towns, the streets were of dirt, with wooden sidewalks. The most imposing structures in town were the two large water towers in the center of it. Although the area was blessed with a river and many streams, little rain actually fell and the inhabitants were forced to make the most of what rainfall there was.

They spoke little on the drive out of town, for which Marguerite, not an admirer of empty pleasantries, was grateful. She spent the time studying her companion - his hair was sandy and damp from sweat under the worn hat. His skin was nearly as leathery as his vest, but the blue eyes that peered out from under the heavy eyebrows were keen, and the lines around them were humorous ones. Aurora had said he was ten years older than herself, so he must be a few years younger than Marguerite.

"Gonna draw a picture?" Alex asked eventually.

"I might," Marguerite said coolly, although caught off-guard. She was glad that her complexion would hide the blush she could feel creeping up her cheeks. "Would you mind?"

Alex shrugged. "Don't see why you'd want to, but it wouldn't hurt me in any way."

"How much further to your ranch?" she asked in order to change the subject.

"About another half hour to the ranch, about that far again to the house."

"How big *is* your ranch?" Marguerite asked, doing a quick calculation.

"Twenty two thousand acres, and a bit," Alex replied.

Marguerite whistled. "That's enormous."

"It's big for out here, but there are larger spreads up and down the valley," Alex said. "Mostly wheat farms or nut orchards around these parts, but we're the largest ranch in the county. Several counties."

He lapsed into silence again - not an uncomfortable silence, Marguerite thought, merely that he was a man who, when he had nothing to say, did not fill up the air with empty words.

"This here's our ranch," he said as they passed an invisible boundary and turned down a rough track. "The orphanage is just off here a piece."

They pulled up in front of a white clapboard house. Several children, apparently just released from school, clattered down the stairs and began playing in the yard. Marguerite spotted Emily's red head among them as the girl began tossing a ball around with some younger children. Molly tripped lightly down the steps, and Alex sprang from the surrey to assist her aboard.

"Admirable timing, Alex," Molly congratulated him.

Alex grinned. "The train was on time." He looked at Marguerite. "Would you like to move to the back with Molly? I'm sure you ladies have more to talk about than I do."

"All right," Marguerite agreed. She hopped down and accepted Alex's aid in stepping up into the rear seat of the surrey.

Molly greeted her warmly, taking her hand. "Thank you for coming, Miss Dumas. I'm so excited about this portrait."

"Please, call me Marguerite." She once again felt drawn. What *was* it about this woman? Marguerite wondered. Had she met her somewhere on her many travels? She did not think so, and surely Molly would have remembered her if that were so - surely the woman could not number many colored women painters among her acquaintances.

"All right, then you must call me Molly."

As they emerged from the track onto the main road, a horse and rider passed them at a gallop. The rider was already reining in his horse when Molly stood, hitting her head against the canopy of the surrey, waving her hand and calling, "Clay!"

Clay Palmer turned his horse and met the surrey, bending down and taking Molly's hand. He planted a hearty kiss on her lips. "No need to shout at me, dearest," he said, a twinkle in his eye, "I could see you well enough."

Although dark-haired instead of blonde, Clay had the same vivid blue eyes as his brother and sister. Regular, somewhat chiseled, features - Marguerite recognized a classical profile when she saw it. She understood Molly's qualms now. Wealthy, handsome, Clay Palmer surely *could* have any woman he wanted. That he evidently wanted the rather plain, middle-aged woman he was currently lavishing his affections on made Marguerite look upon him with a growing respect.

"Dearest," Molly gently pushed Clay away, "this is Miss Dumas."

"I had gathered that," Clay said, reaching across Molly to offer Marguerite his hand. He dismounted, looped his horse's reins to the back of the surrey, and leapt into the seat beside his brother. "Forgive me for missing your train, Miss Dumas. I know Silent Alex here is hardly fit company for a lady." He punched his brother in the arm and Alex grinned back at him.

"He was admirable company," Marguerite defended Alex. "I find him quite pleasant."

"What?" Clay raised his eyebrows comically. "Alex has never been known for his gift of conversation."

"He converses very well," Molly joined in, "after you get to know him. He just doesn't speak unless he has something meaningful to say."

"You're in high spirits, Brother," Alex said. "You must have won your case."

Clay grinned. "That I did - justice was served at long odds."

Molly clapped her hands. "Oh, Clay! That's wonderful! We'll have to celebrate."

"We would be anyway, because Miss Dumas is here," Clay pointed out.

"A double celebration, then," Alex said.

"As you wish. I won't argue." Clay reached back and took Molly's hand. "Plenty of reasons to celebrate," he said warmly.

Marguerite felt a pang of - what? Envy? It should be nothing to her whether others were happy when she was not. Still, she did

wonder what had brought these two together - the plain, poor schoolteacher; the handsome, accomplished landowner. Well, part of painting a portrait was getting to know one's subjects. She would ask, and at the first opportunity.

They arrived at the ranch house, and what an odd construction it was. The front, obviously newer portion, was two-story brick, but part of the back of the house was wood-frame, and part was even built out of whole logs. Evidently, the house had been added to at need over a period of decades - Marguerite appreciated a house with a history, and was curious to learn this one's.

They were greeted in the front hall by Rory and her mother. "Miss Dumas," Clay introduced her, "You already know my sister Aurora, this is my mother, Lenora."

"So pleased to meet you, Miss Dumas," Lenora Palmer said, taking her hand. She was gray-haired, but the children had obviously inherited their eyes from their father, for their mother's eyes were a warm hazel. "Your things have arrived ahead of you," Lenora continued. "Rory, perhaps you'd care to show Miss Dumas to her rooms?"

"May we, Mother?" Molly asked, a gleam in her eye. "Clay and I?"

"If you like," Lenora acceded with a smile. "It was your idea, after all."

Molly took Marguerite by the hand and led her up the broad staircase, Clay following behind. Molly threw open the door to a large room and stood back proudly to let Marguerite enter. An easel stood in the corner; a long, narrow table along one wall for Marguerite's supplies, and a sofa and two wing chairs pushed against the wall. But the highlight of the room was the large window facing north that emitted just the right sort of soft light an artist needed.

"Oh, my, this is wonderful," Marguerite said. "A perfect studio."

"Your bedroom is next door," Molly said, "but I was sure you'd want to see the studio first."

"Thank you - it's very thoughtful," Marguerite smiled. "I'll set up right away."

Clay laughed. "Tomorrow, *mademoiselle*. Tonight you rest and refresh yourself."

"All right," Marguerite said, "but I am eager to get started. What is this room? It's not usually a studio, I presume."

"It was the nursery," Clay said, putting his arm around Molly. "Someday it will be again." Molly looked up at him and smiled, somewhat wistfully. "Soon, we hope," Clay continued, smiling down at her, wistfully as well.

There was a pause, which Molly broke. "Let me show you which room is yours, then you can freshen up and relax a little before dinner."

Marguerite's bedroom was comfortably furnished, although somewhat small. Hot water and towels awaited her on a stand by the dresser, and her trunks had already been brought up, but not unpacked. The Palmers apparently lacked servants - in a more fashionable household, her things would have already been put in the wardrobe and dresser.

Molly and Clay left her to her ablutions, and she had just finished washing up and was changing her dress when there was a knock on the door. "Who is it?" Marguerite asked.

"Rory," came the reply. "I thought you might need some help getting ready."

"Come in." Marguerite hastily gathered the back of her unbuttoned dress together. "Thank you," she said. "I *can* button myself, but some help would be appreciated."

"No problem at all," Rory said, stepping behind Marguerite and tugging at the buttons. She spoke not a word at her task, and although their acquaintance was sparse, Marguerite knew that taciturnity was not a trait Rory shared with her brother.

"Something's bothering you," Marguerite said.

Rory sighed. "Why didn't you come call on us? You said you would."

"I'm sorry," Marguerite said. "This is the first portrait commission I've had in a long time. I needed to practice - the time passed more quickly than I was aware of." *See? I can lie without ever telling a falsehood.*

"Well," Rory said, fastening the last button, "I certainly can't blame you for wanting to do a good job. I sense this is very important to you."

"It could open a lot of doors for me," Marguerite agreed.

"I wish you success, then."

"Thank you." Marguerite turned around. "Have you talked to your family about what we discussed?"

Rory brightened, her eyes flashing. "Yes!" she said. "I'm going to have tutoring over the summer, then enroll in college in the fall - so it'll be back to San Diego. I'll miss my family, but I'm very excited about it."

"I'm sure they'll miss you, too, but I'm sure you'll make friends quickly. You'll have a string full of beaux before you know it."

Rory wrinkled her nose. "I don't want a string full of beaux. Besides, I'm an heiress. Do you have any idea how hard it is to tell if someone likes me for myself, or for my money?"

Oh, indeed I do. "I see your problem - I'm sorry I spoke out of turn. You're embarking on your own adventure, and I'm truly happy for you."

"Thank you." Rory turned to go. "Mother said to tell you that dinner is in half an hour. We don't ring a bell or anything, so come down when you're ready. We usually gather in the parlor before going in to dinner."

"I'll be down soon," Marguerite said as Rory left.

Marguerite finished washing up, then went downstairs to the front hall. Which of these doors led to the parlor? She opened one to discover the library, and was about to close it when she was arrested by a large portrait over the mantelpiece. A man and woman - the woman dark-haired and hazel-eyed, the man blonde and blue-eyed. Mr. and Mrs. Palmer, she surmised. She walked in to study it closer. Yes, the children did get their eyes from their

father. She tilted her head as she gazed at it. It was a fair enough likeness of Mrs. Palmer, but unless the lady had changed a lot in the years since the picture was painted, it was all wrong. Both subjects looked prim and stolid - not the sort of people who had raised the easy-mannered and confident men and young woman Marguerite had met.

"It's not very good, is it?" Marguerite started as Lenora Palmer entered the room behind her. "I'm sorry to startle you," Lenora apologized. "The parlor is across the hall."

"I wasn't sure, then I saw this," Marguerite explained. "It's a good enough likeness, I suppose, but it doesn't seem to capture you."

"I hope not," Lenora said. "I look like a marmish spinster."

Marguerite laughed. "I'm afraid that's true."

"I'm glad you think so. We were all very impressed with your painting of Molly - most people only see her plainness. It takes a keen eye to see how beautiful she really is."

Marguerite was flustered for a moment. "I'm glad you think so."

There was a noise of chatter from across the hall. "Time for dinner." Lenora took Marguerite's arm. "Let us go in together, shall we?"