

Chapter 1



The Palmer Legacy

FICTION

Rawly Rawls

The Palmer Legacy 1

Illustrations by AkyraRayne

Written by RawlyRawls

This is a work of fiction written solely to entertain. If you want to read more of Rawls's work, please visit: <https://rawlyrawls.com>. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. All characters in this work are 18 years or older. Enjoy!

Also join our DISCORD server <https://discord.gg/TWuZA82gWg> if you want to chat with us, ask questions, or post related stuff!

To see more AkyraRayne:

<https://twitter.com/AkyraRayne> or

<https://www.patreon.com/AkyraRayne>

The Woman in the Painting Comes to Life

"That's new." Jessica Reader pointed a delicate finger across the street. A quaint store had opened right next to Café du Nord. There were interesting paintings behind the windows.

"Ohhhh. The Belle Dame Gallery." Mara Rizzuto read the sign with a smile. "Let's check it out." She brushed her black, curly hair out of the way and glanced over her shoulder where her daughter, Ella, was goofing off with Jessica's son, Noah. They were both eighteen and she suspected they'd stop in at the café with hopes of flirting with other teenagers. There weren't many places for young people to congregate in their town. Café du Nord, with all its caffeine, was the main attraction.

Noah glanced at the new store. "Looks boring. Really boring." He exchanged a glance with Ella. "Can I have some money, Mom? We'll wait for you in the café."

Mara laughed. "I knew it. Good luck chasing boys and girls, you two." She reached into her purse.



"Have fun, Noah." Jessica smiled and pulled money from her purse. Each mother handed over some spending money and sent them on their way. Jessica watched the teenagers run off and disappear into the café. The wind suddenly picked up, penetrating her outer layers. She shivered, pulled her coat tightly around her, and followed Mara, careful not to slip on the icy sidewalk.

A tinkling bell rang when they opened the glass door and walked in. "It's so warm in here," Mara said. It felt like a tropical paradise. Which wasn't actually much of a paradise with so many layers on.

"It's like a sauna." Jessica unzipped her coat, unwound her scarf, and took off her knit hat. She shook her red hair and swept it behind her shoulders. "Oh, look. This is pretty." Her eyes were drawn to a large oil painting to her left depicting a woman

playing with an odd, glowing Rubik's cube. The pretty woman sat on a sofa, a young man beside her pointing to some unrecognizable markings on the puzzle. A young woman sat on her other side, smiling knowingly. They all had similar features and the same shade of brown hair. It was clear they were a happy family.

"I don't know. There's something unsettling about this one." Mara looked the painting up and down. She didn't like the body language of the subjects. "Oh, look at this one." She moved to her right and stood in front of a portrait of two women with captivating cold beauty. The subjects were identical twins with dark hair. Each wore a patinaed copper crown and a long flowing dress. One had a stern expression, the other stared out at the viewer with ... Mara wasn't sure. Was the woman hungry? She was so busy studying their faces, she didn't notice the strange lump under the dress of the hungry woman, right between her legs.

"Welcome to my gallery." A small, tweedy man walked toward them from the back of the gallery. He was impeccably dressed, with a quick, deliberate gait. The place was larger than it seemed. Although the space was narrow, the room carried on and on. "I am Mr. Luci, and it is a pleasure to have you here."

"Hello." Jessica turned and gave the little fellow a warm smile. "I'm Mrs. Reader, and my friend is Mrs. Rizzuto. How long has your shop been here?"

"I opened today. You are my first customers." Mr. Luci stopped a few feet away from the ladies. He adjusted his bow tie and clasped his hands in front of him. "But I've been planning this place for a long time. There are so many

licenses and permits in Clover Falls. And I ... chafe at rules. But finally, our adventure begins." His smile broadened. The lights spotlighting the paintings reflected off his glasses, obscuring his eyes.

"Um ... yes." Jessica thought it very presumptuous to include them in *his* adventure.

"Is it Mr. L-u-c-c-i?" Mara cocked her head. "Are you also Italian?"

"Only one C in my name. I'm pre-Italian." Mr. Luci nodded like he had answered her question.

"I see." Mara did not see at all, but she was well-mannered enough to not pester the man with questions. Small town living puts a premium on politeness. She moved to another painting. This one depicted a pregnant woman and a young man hiking by a pristine, high-country lake. The art was exquisite. "Is the price next to this one correct?" She wouldn't be able to afford anything in the store.

"My work is very affordable." Mr. Luci nodded.

"You made these?" Jessica eyed him with new respect.

"In a manner of speaking, yes." Mr. Luci nodded again. "Do you see anything you like?"

"I find the twin ladies captivating." Mara gestured back to the women wearing copper crowns. "But my husband has my purse on a tight leash. It's out of my price range."

Mr. Luci turned his attention to Jessica. "How about you, madam? Are you on a budget today, too?"

"I own my own business, Mr. Luci. I'm an interior designer." Jessica glanced at her friend. "But of course, raising children is very much its own profession."

"No offense taken, Jess." Mara waved a hand dismissively at her friend.

"And do you see anything you like, Mrs. Reader?" Mr. Luci could smell her growing interest.

"I would be the first one in town to own one of your paintings?" Jessica liked to be on the cutting edge.



“Yes, indeed.” Mr. Luci nodded.

“What about this one, Jess? The woman looks just like you. She even has your freckles.” Mara moved down the aisle and pointed.

“Oh, my. She does.” A quiver ran through Jessica, although she wasn’t sure why. It felt almost like the first time she had set eyes on her husband, Andrew. She followed her friend and stood next to her. “What is the story behind this painting?” The portrait depicted three people in Victorian clothes in front of a grand mansion. There was a rose bush nearby, with crimson flowers that nearly leapt from the canvas. A dour man with a mustache stood to one side. A young man with red hair and freckles stood to the other, he was smiling. Jessica’s doppelganger sat in a wicker chair between the men. Her smile was radiant. All three wore black. Jessica noticed that their clothes were ripped, like they’d just wrestled with the rose bush before posing for the painting.

“The more you regard the portrait, the more you will learn their story.” Mr. Luci laughed, a warm pleasant sound that died quickly in the long, narrow room. “I rather think that’s my gift as an artist.”

“It is quite gripping.” Jessica pictured the magnificent work of art in her living room. She would certainly be the talk of the town. She stared at the painted woman’s green eyes. Jessica’s heart drummed in her chest. She imagined the woman attending to her mansion, walking the long corridors ... naked. How odd. The woman was chasing someone playfully. A clock ticked in Jessica’s mind, matching the thump of her heart. The sound compelled her to seek it out.



“Jess ... Jess?” Mara shook her friend’s arm. “Are you okay?”

“What? Oh, yeah.” She had to have that painting. Jessica looked at the price. “Nine hundred is too much for me. Would you take five hundred?”

“I don’t normally negotiate, but since you and the portrait’s main subject could be sisters, we can work something out. How about seven hundred?” Mr. Luci would have given the thing away for free, but an exchange was a necessary part of the process. They negotiated until Jessica was the proud owner for five hundred fifty. He waved goodbye to the women as they carried Jessica’s new prize to her car, each holding one end. His first sale had gone very well.

~~

"It's creepy, Jess. I don't want it in our living room." Andrew eyed the painting like it might bite him. He was a fit man with glasses and sandy brown hair. "You should return it."

"Come on, Dad. I think it's ... interesting."

Noah reclined on the sofa, his skinny legs propped on the coffee table. His features matched his mother's, but he had his father's complexion. "There's a spot right there for it." He pointed over near the Christmas tree.

"I was actually thinking it could go above the mantle." Jessica bit her lower lip. She hated to disagree with Andrew. "I do know design, and I think it would look wonderful. Can we put it there, please?"

"You want to replace our family photo with that thing?" Andrew stared wide-eyed at the painting,

then glanced at the framed photo of him and his wife and their three children that hung above the fireplace. Only Noah was still at home, his sisters had left for college and beyond. Andrew loved that family portrait. He looked back at the painting. The man with the mustache seemed to be staring daggers at him. "I feel strongly about this, Jess. It can't go in here."

"Fine." Jessica's lip quivered. "I'll put it in my office, then."

"You know, Mom." Noah contemplated the painting for a while. "That woman sort of looks like you."

"I know, honey." Jessica nodded. "Can you help me move this to my office?" She shot her husband a sharp look so that he would know she didn't want his help. The glare wasn't needed, Andrew was already walking away.

"Sure, Mom." Noah got up. He was about the same height as his mother. His dad was taller and more fit than him, a better man for hanging a large, heavy painting. But he could tell she didn't want his father's help. They rarely argued, so it was odd to experience the chill between them. Noah was glad when he and his mother were out of the room, carefully moving the painting to its new home.



~~

Jessica ran through the mansion, her breasts bouncing unconstrained. Her son had just turned nineteen. Not Noah, he was only eighteen. No, this was her son from the painting. They were playing a game to celebrate his birthday. She caught a glimpse of his alabaster skin up ahead. She could see the smattering of freckles on his shoulders. Between his legs swung a prodigious tool. He possessed a gift designed to please women. The sight of it pleased her very much.

She ran faster, her toes digging into the thick carpet that ran down the middle of the hall. She turned to follow him down the stairs, her whole body shaking with each bounce. Suddenly, she was in his arms. Her son had been waiting for her. He said something she could not hear and then his lips were on hers.



A knock on her door roused Jessica. She lifted her head from her desk and wiped drool from her chin. Friscalating dusklight fell through her windows. Where had the afternoon gone? She picked up a paper and fanned herself with it. She was sweaty. The knock on the door sounded again. The ticking clock echoed in her office. She had been napping for hours. Could that really have happened? Her computer had gone to sleep. She stood and moved to the door, straightening out her dress. "Coming." She opened the door and there stood her husband.



"I thought it was your turn to make dinner tonight." Andrew frowned at his wife, but his face softened when he saw her bewildered expression. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Jessica leaned forward and kissed Andrew on the cheek. "I must have dozed off. I didn't get any work done this afternoon. And ... I meant to start dinner before you got home. Sorry, dear."

"It's okay." He gave a forced smile. "I'll order pizza. Maybe you should take a shower." He could see the sweat glistening on her forehead. "That must have been some nap."

"It was." Jessica nodded and watched her husband depart.

When she was in the shower, she vigorously cleaned her body. No matter how thoroughly she scrubbed with the loofa, she still felt dirty. The woman in her dreams had kissed her son. They had both been naked and sweaty. And Jessica had been a part of it somehow. Maybe she should take the painting back to Mr. Luci. It had stirred something inside her that was better left still. But she didn't want to be a bother to the gallery owner. How awful would be it be for the poor man to have his first sale returned? And she didn't want to give her husband the satisfaction of being right about the painting. She would leave it on the wall in her office.

~~



"When does Hailey get in, Mom?" Noah nibbled on his slice of pizza. His mother stared into space, her hand on her wine glass. "Mom?"

"Oh, sorry, honey." Jessica's smile was brief and flat.

"Your mother fell asleep in her office today. She's a little out of sorts." Andrew gulped his beer. "Ella's family will be over for dinner tomorrow night. Hailey will fly in the day after that. Paget and Clive should arrive on Christmas Eve."

"Do you need me to pick up Hailey at the airport?" Noah loved any excuse to drive his clunker of a car.

"I'd like your sister to come home alive." Andrew smiled. "Your mother will pick her up."

"Yes ... yes ..." Jessica had been daydreaming. Right in the middle of dinner. In her mind, she had been running naked in the ornate mansion, but this time something had been hunting her. A shiver went down her spine. "I'll pick up Hailey. You'll be in school anyway, Noah. No cutting class." She wagged a finger at him.

"I'm almost done, Mom. What does it matter if I cut class?"

"Don't remind me. You'll be graduating before we know it. I'm going to miss you so much, Noah." She ruffled his hair. Touching him felt electric. Her hand recoiled and her pulse quickened. "Don't cut class," she said shortly.



"Your mother's right." Andrew eyed his wife with raised eyebrows. "You can't take your foot off the pedal until the end. We're proud of all you've accomplished, but it's not over."

"Sure." Noah shrugged and took another bite of pizza. They ate the rest of their dinner in relative silence.

~~

"The bond, the pact, the contract made." Noah's mother watched him closely with mercurial, green eyes. "We paid and received and the Devil took his due. All we need from you is your approbation, honey."

"No ... no ..." Noah backed away. It wasn't his mother. Her sweet voice was wrong, and even in the shadows he could see he had mistaken his mother's face for the woman in the painting. He ran blindly through the mansion. "Never ... I will never ..."

Noah's room was pitch-black when he awoke and shot up in bed. "Just a nightmare," he muttered to himself. He crawled out of bed and stumbled to the window. He pulled back the curtains and moonlight flooded his room. He exhaled and relaxed. But held his breath all over again when he heard the sound of footsteps outside his room. He walked to the door, opened it, and peeked out.

For a second, he thought it was the woman in the painting come to life. His blood froze. But then he recognized his mother's familiar gait. She was walking down the hall with her back to him. She wore only a t-shirt and panties, and her pale legs glimmered in the moonlight. She turned down the stairs and disappeared.

"Mom?" Noah stepped out from his room. He didn't hear a response. "Mom?" He said a little louder. Still no response. He was dressed only in his boxers and the house was quite cold. He cursed his dad's energy-saving thermostat policy, hugged his bare chest with his arms, and followed his mother. He caught a glimpse of her at the bottom of the stairs and hurried after her. Once in the kitchen, he saw just her pale legs moving down the hall. Noah stopped outside her office door. Inside, she stood facing her new painting.

"It's too big ... too big," Jessica mumbled. Her hands hung limply by her sides. Her shoulders drooped.

"Mom?" Noah took an uncertain step into the office. "What are you talking about?" He was mystified.

"It's so ... cold." Jessica made no effort to hug herself for warmth. She stood perfectly still, half-naked, next to her desk.



“It is frigid.” Noah walked around in front of his mother. Her eyes stared blankly at the portrait. He waved a hand in front of her face. There was no response. She didn’t see him. “You’re sleepwalking, Mom.” He took her shoulders in his hands and shook them. He was shocked when she leaned forward and planted a kiss on his lips. He backed away quickly.



"Noah?" Jessica recoiled when she realized what had happened. "You kissed me!" She blinked as she took in her surroundings. How had she gotten into her office?

"I did not!" Noah panicked. He would die of embarrassment if his sweet mother thought he'd kissed her on the lips. "You were sleepwalking. You must have kissed Dad in your dream."



"Oh ... yes, it was ... your father ... in my dream." Her gaze returned to her son and her eyes widened when she realized he was practically naked! He was a skinny teenager, but that made the large lump in his boxers seem all that much larger. She put a hand to her mouth and quickly looked away. "What are you doing up?"

"I had a nightmare and then heard you in the hall." Noah shrugged. He snuck a surreptitious peek at her nipples poking through her thin shirt. Had it gotten even colder in her office?

"Well, go back to bed." She moved to hug him, but stopped herself. That would not be appropriate under the circumstances. "I'm sorry about what happened. I don't think I've ever sleepwalked before. In the future, wake your father if it happens."

"That way you'll kiss the right guy." Noah tried to laugh, but his voice quickly died away. "Goodnight, Mom." He waved awkwardly and left the office. He was a little surprised that she didn't follow him upstairs, but shrugged it off. She was clearly out of sorts.

~

The bell jingled merrily when Jessica entered The Belle Dame. The heat of the place instantly made its cloying presence known. She unzipped her coat, removed her hat and scarf, and looked about. She was startled to see about a half-dozen patrons admiring the paintings. She knew them all as mothers from PTA meetings and other school functions. When several looked her way, she offered a closed-lip smile. Thankfully, none of them seemed interested in chatting. After they'd made their greetings, the women turned back to regarding the artwork.

"Hello, Mrs. Reader." Mr. Luci ambled up to his first customer. He adjusted his bow tie and stuck out his hand. "How do you do?" He cocked his head quizzically.

"Hello, Mr. Luci." Jessica grasped his hand loosely and shook it. She noted the firmness and dryness of his shake, despairing that her grip was neither. When her hand was freed, she wiped her palm on her coat. "What is your policy on returns and exchanges? I have the painting in my car."

"Oh, my. What seems to be the problem?" He gently put his hand on her shoulder and guided her away from the other women, toward the back of the gallery.

"Well, Mr. Luci ... um ... may I ask your first name?" Jessica was distracted for a second by a painting they passed. It had a science fiction setting, but was clearly a take on da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. Instead of apostles, pregnant women sat on either side of the Christ figure. They all had their hair in Amish braids, and their futuristic uniforms reminded Jessica of Amish clothing. The Christ figure was a young man with a serene smile. Some of Mr. Luci's works were quite odd.

"My first name is Fleur," he said.

"Fleur Luci," Jessica said the name quietly to herself. "That is unusual."

"My father can be severe." Mr. Luci smiled. "But he is prodigiously creative." They were now a good way from the browsing women. They stopped in front of a depiction of a wild-looking woman howling at the moon. In the background, the shadows of her companions could barely be seen running on all fours into the woods.

"So, can I return the painting, Mr. ... um ... Fleur ... sir?" Now that she'd learned his first name, she wasn't sure she wanted to use it.

"What seems to be the problem, Mrs. Reader?" Mr. Luci steepled his hands in contemplation, or maybe prayer. "You and that painting were made for each other. You are the spitting image of Mrs. Palmer."

"Mrs. Palmer?" Jessica perked up. "So, there *is* a story that goes with the painting?"

"Mrs. Palmer lived in the nineteenth century. Like you, she was a timid woman." He smiled at her look of shock at his forward comment. "She discovered a truth that gave her strength. She became quite brave, even when others sought to constrain her. Eloise Palmer's indomitable spirit lives on. I pray it will be a guiding light to women everywhere."



Jessica set her jaw. She liked the cut of Eloise Palmer's jib. Her fears receded in her mind. "I have been very silly, Mr. Luci. If she could be brave despite all that she faced in her day, then I can shrug off a few nightmares. She goes back up on the wall. What else can you tell me about her?"

"I have to return to my other customers. Maybe when I'm less busy I can tell you her full story." Mr. Luci anxiously looked back at the other women, two of whom were heading for the exit.

"Yes, of course." Jessica nodded, dismissing the diminutive man. "I think I'll browse for a little while."

"As you wish." Mr. Luci hustled to head off the women before they left.

Jessica listened to him entertain the women and steer them toward a painting with a tall blond knight racing down a curving stairway, accompanied by armored women.

Hoping the place would quiet down so that she could get the story out of Mr. Luci, Jessica moved from painting to painting, biding her time. After a half hour, there were more customers than before, so she gave up and headed home. She would get Noah's help hanging the painting in her office again.

~~



"I hope you don't feel weird about last night, honey." Jessica stood a few feet from Noah. They were both regarding Eloise Palmer, back in her spot on the office wall. "I was just confused." She frowned. It occurred to her that she didn't know the other Palmers' names. Of course, she knew that Eloise's son was nineteen, and built like a model. She shook her head. She didn't know any such things, those had only been dreams. Anyway, a modest and courageous woman like Mrs. Palmer wouldn't do something so abhorrent. Jessica's shoulders gave an involuntary shake.

"It's fine, Mom. You were asleep. Let's forget about it." Noah rubbed his chin. "Hey ... I didn't notice before how far away the man with the mustache was from the other two. I could have sworn he was standing there." He pointed to a place just to the woman's right. "Wasn't his arm behind her?"

"Yeah ... I could have sworn ..." Jessica tilted her head and looked at the dour man. His expression was even more disapproving than she remembered it. "That is odd. But people in paintings don't move." She let out a nervous laugh.

Noah shrugged. "There's this theory called the Mandela Effect, that when multiple people remember something that didn't happen, they're actually remembering a parallel universe. It has something to do with quantum mechanics. It turns out a ton of people thought Nelson Mandela died in prison in the 80s, but of course he didn't die until much later. The most famous example of the Mandela Effect is the Berenstain Bears. Remember those books? How would you spell the name?"



"I remember." Jessica turned her attention away from the painting and watched her son give his mini-lecture. He looked so confident and handsome. Her heart warmed. "B - e - r - e - n - s - t - e - i - n."

"You're not alone. That's how most people remember it. But it's spelled a - i - n. Berenstain." Noah caught the confused look in her eyes and laughed. "Did I just blow your mind? You remember that from a parallel universe."

"Yes ... well ... really?" She laughed with him. The sound released tension she didn't even know had been building.

"Well, no. Of course, it's all bullshit." Noah's laughter faded. "It's only people misremembering and being so sure about their false memories that they have to invent a bogus quantum mechanical theory to explain it."

"Language, Noah."

"Sorry." He offered a sheepish grin. "It's hogwash."

"That is interesting." She turned her attention back to the painting. "Because I really do feel like that man stood closer to the other two."

"Yeah, but we're just remembering it wrong." Noah followed her gaze back to the painting. It was uncanny, he was almost certain the man had stood in a different spot. "Something about this painting tricks the mind, like the Berenstain Bears."

"I guess so." Jessica shivered. It suddenly felt very cold in her office. "Thank you for your help, honey. Now run along. You've got homework to do before the Rizzutos arrive. And I have a design I need to get to a client."

"Sure. See you later, Mom." Noah gave the painting one last glance and left the office.

Jessica followed him to the door, closed it, and turned back to her desk. She sat in her chair, turned on her computer, and spun to her keyboard. Her hand froze reaching for her mouse. Lying on her keyboard was a leatherbound book she'd never seen before. She picked it up and read the spine. "*First Love* by Ivan Turgenev," she whispered. She had work to do. But instead, she opened the book and started reading.

~~

“Did you hear what Ben Shapiro said about that new song W ... A ... P?” Antonio Rizzuto shook his head slowly, looking around the table. His wife gave him her *knock it off* look, but he continued. “I won’t say the name of the actual song, but it’s disgusting. Ben’s wife is a doctor, and she said that wetness *down there* is a sign of poor health.”



“Oh, stop it, Tony. No one wants to talk about this.” Mara put a hand over her eyes and bowed her head.

Andrew came to his friend’s aid. “It’s true. Isn’t it, Jessica?” He looked to his wife for approval.

Jessica stiffly nodded her head.

“It’s so crazy that kids these days think something so disgusting is worth celebrating in a song,” Andrew said.

“We were young once, too.” Jessica frowned and stood. She started clearing dishes. “You may be right, but it’s not something to discuss at the dinner table.”

Mara stood and helped her friend clear. “Let’s talk about something else. How are you enjoying the painting? I’m so jealous ...” She followed Jessica into the kitchen.

“It’s just science,” Antonio called after them.

In the den, Ella and Noah could hear their parents. Ella sat leaning forward on the sofa, trying her best to beat her friend in their FIFA game. Noah sat on the floor. He was up by two goals.



“That’s ... crazy.” Most of what Noah knew about girls was from porn, so he wasn’t sure how wet a normal woman would get, if at all. He’d kissed a few girls and felt one up, but that was it. “Ben Shapiro’s wife isn’t right ... is she?”

“Are you really asking me that?” Ella could tell he was distracted. Her player stole the ball and streaked down the sideline for a crossing pass. “Gross ... dude.”

“Sorry. I was just wondering.” He went quiet.

“I’m not Google, Noah. Ask your phone if you want to know about women.” Ella’s team scored.

“Will do.” Noah kept his eyes on the television. He had the sudden notion that instead of the computer, he should ask his mom’s new painting. His mom’s doppelganger knew everything there was to know about sex. He was so sure of it one moment, and the next he realized how insane that was. The lady in the painting might have known some things about sex or not. But she had been dead for more than a century. She wasn’t going to tell him anything.

In the dark of Jessica's office, Eloise Palmer patted her son's arm, turned her face toward him and smiled warmly. Her husband took another step toward the edge of the painting.

