

# A Dying Man's Wish

By Sandra Easter

Jacob lifts the metal storage door with ease. It rattles and bangs against its constraints before slamming to a halt and bouncing down a foot. Dust and dirt particles swirl around him as he enters. His feet scrape against the cement of the nearly empty storage container, echoing through the small space. A single, worn cardboard box full of paper occupies a corner. The creek and slam of a rusted door announce his passenger joining him.

"This is it? How am I supposed to know whom that belongs to?" Jacob says.

"What did that old man hide out here?" Kelly says from beside him with her hands settled on her hips.

"It looks like a box of paper. Posters maybe?" Jacob closes the distance between the box and himself.

The paper isn't paper at all, but heavy, aged canvases covered in cracking paint. Jacob shuffles through them. He stops at one painting of a man. Going back to the first painting of a small sail ship fighting the sea, he continues back through the paintings again. Taking a moment to look at each one before going to the next.

"Holy shit. There's no way," Jacob steps back from the box.

"What?" Kelly bends over the box examining the paintings. "Is that a Vermeer?"

"I can't believe it. I didn't know the old man had it in him."

"Stop touching them. They're almost ruined. The oil on your fingers will only make it worse."

"What the hell do you want me to do? I can't just leave them here. Besides, Papa wanted me to return them to the rightful owner."

"Crazy old man. You need to call the FBI."

"So I can go to the slammer? Have you lost your mind?"

"Didn't you want to fulfill your father's final wish?"

"Way to guilt me, Kelly. Thanks." Jacob pulls out his phone and googles the FBI hotline for reporting the discovery of the paintings. "My name is Jacob Reader. I need to report the discovery of the stolen paintings from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum."

Jacob informs the FBI agent of their location. He switches the phone to his left hand to wipe his right on his jeans. His feet shift, making scraping noises in the dirt on the concrete. Moments later, Jacob presses the red button on the screen.

"Well?" Kelly hits Jacob when he doesn't say anything. "What are you going to do?"

"They are on their way. Did you know there was an FBI office fifteen minutes away in Chelsea?"

"Really? Well, at least you can get this over with now. Rip the band-aid off and all that."

"Kelly, what if they arrest me?"

"You're not going to be arrested. Why would your father try to get you arrested?"

"Have you met my family?" Kelly shakes her head, but otherwise doesn't say anything in response.

They sit in the truck with the doors open. The sun gleams off the few glossy paint spots of the rusted truck. Even with a breeze ruffling their hair, sweat trickled down their faces. Kelly's hair sticks to her forehead, and her fingers when she tries to move it from her face.

Three black cars heading their way crunch gravel under the tires. Kelly and Jacob get out of the truck when the logo of the FBI is visible to them. One agent gets out of their vehicle, the rest stay in the running cars.

"Mr. Jacob Reader?" the agent says. He puts his hand out for Jacob to shake. "I'm Agent Palmer. You're the one that found the paintings?"

"Yes." Jacob says.

"May I?" Agent Palmer says. He gestures to the storage until Jacob nods his assent. Palmer puts black rubber gloves on before examining the paintings. He tilts the box to carefully pull one out from the back and runs his fingers over the edge of the painting. He turns to look at Jacob.

"Well, Mr. Reader, you have quite the find here. How did you say you came about these?"

"I found these due to a man's dying wish," Jacob says.

"His father died recently and told him where to find them." Kelly says. The agent nods.

"Come with me." Palmer says. Jacob follows him to his vehicle. Palmer leans and talks to someone inside. "Mr. Reader, today is your lucky day after all. There's a reward for these."

“I’m not asking for a reward.” Jacob says. Palmer smiles and hands Jacob an envelope. Jacob opens the envelope and finds a type written five-million-dollar check. His hands shake, vibrating the paper. His eyes tear up, his head drops and he shakes as he weeps.