

EXCERPT FROM

The Fine Art of Murder

A MURDER, SHE WROTE MYSTERY

Jessica Fletcher is on a tour in Italy that specializes in bringing tourists to great artworks hanging, not in museums, but in out-of-the way places like local churches. Among her traveling companions on the tour is retired policeman Luca Fanello, a devotee of the arts.

...Our final stop was the Church of San Bernardino, named after another saint who'd come to L'Aquila, Saint Bernardino of Siena. He died in the town, which angered the Sienese, who never got his body back. He was honored in L'Aquila with a magnificent Renaissance church, including an imposing mausoleum sculptured by noted Abruzzese sculptor Silvestro dell'Aquila. Of all the churches we'd visited that day, this was the most impressive. Our tour guide, Simone, had saved this stop for last because it contained the finest work of art we'd seen on the tour, a large oil painting depicting a lush garden in which a semi-nude woman pleaded with a huge man holding in his bloodstained, beefy hands what one could only assume was her child.

"Bellini was greatly influenced by Mantegna," Simone informed us as we stood in front of the piece, impressed into silence by its power and form. "His most famous work was *Agony in the Garden*, and as you can see, this painting follows through on the garden theme. Bellini's own influence on artists in Venice was profound, and his many students went on to success of their own."

As he spoke, two friars in hooded cassocks entered the church. They stopped at a stone urn that held holy water and waited while a child held by her mother scooped out a handful of water and splashed it on the floor before raising a chubby hand to her face. "No. No. No," I heard the mother say. She apologized to the men in rapid Italian, picked up the child, and hastened out of the church.

The friars stood quietly, then dipped their hands in the water, crossed themselves, and slowly walked down the aisle opposite ours.

“The reason this particular work has not been displayed in museums is a debate over its true origins, whether Bellini himself painted it or whether it was his best students who did the work. The consensus is that it is the work of one of his students. As far as I’m concerned, this shouldn’t make all that much difference. Many great artists had students who contributed to finished works that bear the name of the master.”

Simone moved us up the aisle toward another painting on the opposite side of the church, where the religious brothers stood admiring a statue of the Madonna. As we passed the urn, I noticed footprints on the floor made by someone walking through the spilled water.

“That’s funny,” I murmured.

“What’s funny?” my companion Signore Fanello asked.

“Those footprints,” I said, pointing to the pattern that led down the aisle we were approaching. “They look like sneakers.”

“Not so unusual,” he said.

I looked up. “Yes, but the only people who walked through the water before us were those two robed friars. I guess I never thought of friars wearing sneakers.” I glanced around to see where they were. They had circled to the back of the church and one of them was locking the door. Before I could ask myself why a friar would need to lock the church, his companion whipped off his cassock, flung it to the side, and pointed a gun in our direction. He was a young man in black jeans, a black T-shirt, and running shoes, as was his accomplice. Both held out pistols, jerkily pointing them at each of the six of us and shouting in Italian words that were obviously orders of some kind. Their voices ricocheted off the church’s sacred walls as they waved us out of the center aisle and into

pews. One woman on the tour began wailing and collapsed back onto the pew. In an apparent attempt to silence the crying woman, one of the gunmen shouted at her, brandishing his pistol in front of her. She managed to stifle her sobs, and instead began rapidly chanting prayers in a low, choked voice. Simone muttered, "Don't do anything to anger them. Let them do what they came here to do."

Moments later it was obvious what they were after. While one of them kept us huddled together at gunpoint, the other tucked his gun in his belt and, using a crowbar he'd hidden under his clerical robe, went to work removing the Bellini painting from the wall over the altar.

"Can't you say something to stop them?" I asked Simone.

He put his index finger to his lips and shook his head. He was right, of course. It wasn't worth losing anyone's life in order to rescue a painting. Still . . .

The young man holding the handgun on us kept muttering in Italian, frequently glancing back to see how his colleague was faring. The painting had obviously been firmly anchored to the wall, and I assumed that what both men were saying in Italian contained at least a modicum of four-letter words. Finally, the Bellini was freed and the crowbar-wielding young man carried the painting over to where we crowded together, afraid to move or to speak. One of the thieves barked something at Simone.

"He says no one will be hurt, and we are to keep our mouths shut to the police."

The thief holding the canvas took a few steps toward the doors through which they'd come. At that moment—and it took everyone by surprise, including me—Mr. Fanello, who stood in front of me, reached down, drew a small revolver from an ankle holster, brought it up, and fired a single shot at the young man who held his weapon in his right hand. The shot struck him in the left shoulder. Simultaneously, he got off a shot that hit Fanello in the forehead, directly

between the eyes. Blood spewed into the air as he toppled backward, crashing into me and almost sending me on top of the woman who was praying loudly in Italian. A plume of the downed former policeman's blood filled the air and I raised my hand to keep it from hitting me. I locked eyes with the wounded art thief, who appeared to be in shock. He hadn't moved; his dark gaze was filled with surprise, anger, and hate. We were only two feet apart, and every detail of his dusky, youthful face registered with me—one eye, his left, slightly lower than his right, with an eyelid that drooped a bit, a tiny scar, which looked fresh, on his right cheek; a prominent and somewhat crooked nose; soft black curls that fell over his narrow forehead.

He raised his gun and pointed it at me. His hand trembled and my eyes followed the movement of the muzzle as it shifted back and forth across my face. I heard the trigger being cocked. Then a loud noise made him spin around toward the church door. His cohort with the painting had released the lock, and shouted something at him. The injured gunman took a last glance at me, turned, and stumbled up the aisle, clutching his shoulder and mumbling something that sounded distinctly threatening. I sank down onto the pew, next to the woman, who was wailing again, a dead policeman at my feet.