

THE LOST LOGO

Stephen Brown



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Prologue

A Season in Hell

Zut alors.

Francine Lafarge cursed beneath her breath as she reversed Fifi, a bright red Renault Espace, into the narrow parking bay. It had been a long day, much more stressful than she'd anticipated. One of her group had wandered off in the early afternoon, then turned up chewing a *canelé*. The rest of the group was raging. Not because they were inconvenienced, though that was a contributory factor. But because the pastry looked delicious and they hadn't got one themselves! It smelled delicious too, lingering for a long time in the people carrier, compounding the agony for everyone else. She could have stopped at a *pâtisserie* to let the group assuage their gastric urges. However, that would have made a mess of Fifi, her *cherie voiture*. Tourists were such uncouth eaters. Americans especially. Much as she relied on their generosity, there were limits to her hospitality.

"Okay everyone," Francine said over her right shoulder, while applying the handbrake with a Francophone flourish. Fifi shrugged in concert. "This is our last stop. The highlight of the tour. We'll walk *La Grande Galerie* where Jacques Saunière was brutally murdered. We'll spend some time in the *Salle des Etats*, where Sophie Neveu and Robert Langdon discovered the first cryptic message, So Dark the Con of Man. And after all that, we'll see *La Pyramide Inversée*, where the climax of Brown's book unfolds. Is it the final resting place of Mary Magdalene, wife of Jesus Christ, mother of his son and begetter of the Merovingian line that is protected by the shadowy Priory of Sion and, indeed, carries His genes to this very day?"

"Arrgh, you've just spoiled the ending," a voice interrupted from the back of the van. Everyone laughed. The pastry incident

was forgotten in the mounting excitement of the moment. Thank heaven for small mercies ... and little girls. *Mais oui?*

As she steered her flock through the underground garage and into the elevators – where she made her usual joke about Robert Langdon’s claustrophobia – Francine Lafarge counted her Dan Brown blessings. A mousey, middle-aged, mild-mannered Monoprix-wearer, she’d been running Da Vinci Code Tours for more than four years, and the fans kept coming. Numbers waxed and waned with the seasons and the weather and of course movie releases and DVDs and internet rumours of a new novel by the famously reclusive author. But even in the depths of winter, when the book had long since disappeared from the bestseller lists, there were hardy Americans keen to see the settings, stroll the streets, follow the action, spot the art or debate the finer points of Brown’s blockbuster with fellow fanatics and thriller seekers.

The long trudge through the connecting passageways commenced. Uninviting though the dimly lit corridors were, they always seemed to heighten the anticipation of her tour parties. Francine took the opportunity to trot out a potted history of the Louvre – its twelfth-century start, its role as a royal residence, its conversion to a museum in 1793, the construction of I. M. Pei’s controversial glass pyramid in 1989 – then segued into a bunch of believe-it-or-not factlets. “Shaped like an enormous horseshoe, the Louvre is the largest building in Europe. It stretches further than three Eiffel towers laid end to end. Walking the perimeter is a 4.8 kilometre journey. There are 65,300 pieces of art on display in the building and it is estimated that five full days are needed to see it all. We have one hour!”

Surprisingly few of Francine’s groups recognized the source of her data. They were taken directly from *The Da Vinci Code* and, like most of the book’s supposedly “true” facts, they were incorrect. There were only 24,000 art works on display in the museum but, even if you only allowed one minute’s viewing per piece, it would still take eight weeks to “appreciate” them all. Four years ago, when she first started the tours, she’d taken great pleasure in pointing out the gaping plot-holes in Brown’s novel. But Dan’s fans, she’d found, didn’t like having their illusions shattered by pernickety Parisians, much less pedantic art historians.

So she told them what they wanted to hear. Her tips-take soared accordingly.

"And this," Francine said dramatically, as they emerged into Napoleon Hall, an enormous atrium filled with bright refracted sunlight, "is the Pyramid." The great glass edifice soared above them. Like it or loathe it, Pei's pyramid certainly impressed the paying public, especially those who emerged, blinking, from the bowels of underground parking garage.

Francine was about to go into her potted patter on the Pyramid's 666 panes of glass – the number of the Antichrist, insisted upon by President Mitterrand – when a pushy passerby started speaking. "Built fifty-seven feet beneath ground level," he announced to the assembled group, "the Louvre's newly constructed 70,000-square-foot lobby spread out like an endless grotto. Constructed in warm ochre marble to be compatible with the honey-coloured stone of the Louvre façade above, the subterranean hall was usually vibrant with sunlight and tourists. Tonight, however, the lobby was barren and dark, giving the entire space a cold and crypt-like atmosphere."

The speaker paused for dramatic effect. "That's from page twenty-two of the airport edition!" They all laughed. "Have a nice one, guys," he added, before disappearing off down a corridor in the general direction of *La Pyramide Inversée*. The tour party applauded. "Way to go, bro," the porcine pastry purchaser shouted after their bespectacled, backpack-wearing informant. He raised his baseball cap and waved over his shoulder, without turning round.

Ordinarily, Francine Lafarge would have welcomed the erudite contribution. It was a pleasant surprise that bonded the group. And a bonded group meant bigger tips. But there was something vaguely disturbing about the softly spoken American stranger. She'd seen him before, somewhere. A previous tour party? On the Champs-Élysées? At Saint Sulpice, where she usually sat outside having a cigarette and watching the world go by while the party potted and poked and, occasionally, prayed within?

Francine couldn't remember. She wasn't as young as she used to be. It would come to her.

Unsettled now, the interruption disturbed Francine's flow,

her time-grooved spiel. She ploughed on regardless. Group tickets bought and distributed, she led the way to the Denon wing. As per the “Louvre Lite” tour in Brown’s book, she paused to point out *Winged Victory*, steered the group around *Venus de Milo* – wryly adding that authentic replicas of her nail varnish, hand cream, fingerless gloves and charity wristbands were on sale in the museum shop – and finally emerged into the resplendent *Grande Galerie*. With its famous parquet floor, unbroken line of Renaissance masterpieces and non-existent security gates that dropped down to trap intruders (wrong again, Dan!), it was far and away the highlight of the day, the moment when the *Mona Lisa* made her imperious entrance. The *Salle des Etats* was the holy of holies, the sanctum sanctorum, the room with a view – a very distant view – of Leonardo’s greatest hit.

It was only during her recitation on the history of *La Joconde* – tour groups, she’d found, much preferred to hear about the 1911 theft than debunking Dan Brown’s daft symbology – that a curious thought hit Francine. Maybe it was the author himself who’d delivered the word-perfect peroration. Surely not. She’d have heard if Dan were back in town. Wouldn’t she? The other tour guides would’ve talked. Wouldn’t they? Maybe not, it’s a dog-eat-dog business, where juicy titbits of information were hoarded rather than shared.

Dismissing such unproductive thoughts, Francine reassembled her group. She reminded them that they were free to roam around the galleries when the tour ended and herded them towards the bank of elevators at the mid-point of *La Grande Galerie*. Talking excitedly, the tight-packed party descended to the lower levels, where they went one way to see *La Pyramide Inversée* and she went the other to the underground car park. Some would wander back up to the peerless galleries, others would make do with the subterranean shopping precinct, where every other store stocked *Da Vinci Code* souvenirs. It was hard to believe that the Louvre’s bureaucrats once dismissed Dan’s book as a cretinous cultural travesty or that the crusty clergymen at Saint Sulpice initially refused entry to *Da Vinci Code* enthusiasts. Money talks the world over, but in the City of Light the tourist euro shouts loudest of all.

Time to say Francine's fond farewell. She usually concluded with a dash of Dan's doggerel, a word-for-word recap of the final lines of Brown's book, the ones that pointed to *La Pyramide Inversée*. But Brown had been recited once already that afternoon. *L'étranger* had stolen her thunder. So she settled for "merci, merci, merci," shaking hands with each individual in turn. Naturally, she started with the ones most likely to give a gratuity – they were easy to spot, since they'd fiddled in their pockets and purses on the way down – because once one started, the rest inevitably followed suit, regardless of their reluctance. No one likes to appear cheap, not on holiday anyway. Actually, much as she disliked Americans in the round (and many of them were very round indeed), this particular cheese-eating surrender monkey recognized that Freedom Fries-lovers were very big tippers. "Enjoy the rest of your stay in Paris. *Au revoir*."

"*Au revoir*," they called out, as each went their separate ways.

"Another day, another Danfan," Francine sighed. She'd done well, despite the unsettling interruption and the pastry incident earlier. Fantasizing about the hot bath to come and maybe a revivifying glass or two of Pouilly-Fumé, she walked quickly along the long corridor that led to the car parks. Passing Starbucks, she glanced haughtily at the god-forsaken American pissoir. Call that coffee? *Merde*, maybe.

Then she saw him. There he was. That's where she'd seen him before! At the table by the window. Watching, watching, watching. Always watching. Every day this week. Francine accidentally caught his eye, then looked away quickly. She hurried to the elevator, descended three levels and looked around for Fifi. Where was she? Which bay? Wrong level? She wandered, lost, around the crypt-like car corral. "Ah, there you are, you cheeky scamp."

With a smile of relief, Francine squeezed her key fob. Fifi's sidelights flashed flirtatiously. The locks released with a resounding thunk.

"*Pardonnez-moi*, Madame Lafarge." The voice was American. Masculine. Menacing.

Panic-stricken, Francine whirled round wildly, eyes agape, mouth open.

Her interlocutor laughed. "Sorry to frighten you, Francine.

I forgot my scarf." It was Mr Pastry. Panic over. Phew. Punters were always leaving something behind in the van. Gloves, hats, perfume, passports. You name it, they forgot it. She opened the sliding side door and let him sidle in. The Burberry scarf lay curled in the back seat, like a plaid python. Obviously embarrassed by the scare he'd given her, Mr Pastry started chatting about his holiday plans. Eiffel Tower ascent. Day trip to Versailles. Notre Dame. Sacré Coeur. Blah, blah, blah. Out of politeness, Francine walked him back to the bank of elevators then said her final fond farewell. Yes, she'd definitely drop in when passing through Peoria, Illinois. *Mon dieu!*

Fifi burst into life, eager to escape the lowest Louvre level. Francine slipped her pride and joy into first, prepared to release the handbrake and automatically eyed the rear-view, even though there was only a blank wall behind.

There was a face as well. His face. She tried to scream, but a hand covered her mouth. She stood on the accelerator but the handbrake held firm. She made a grab for her assailant, but he snapped her head back sharply. She so wanted to live but that wasn't going to happen. She felt the knife slit her throat and saw bright-red arterial blood spurting everywhere. All over Fifi, her precious! This isn't happening. This can't be happening. This isn't a trashy Dan Brown thriller, where a minor character gets brutally murdered in the very first chapter. Or, even worse, the prologue...

Chapter One

Everything's Coming My Way

"Oh what a beautiful morning," Abby Maguire bellowed, while towelling off after a bracing cold shower. "Oh what a beautiful day," her rich contralto boomed, compensating in volume what it lacked in control. "I've got a wonderful feeling," the raven-haired twenty-five-year-old with a pretty face and a figure to match, continued sonorously...

Everything didn't quite come Abby's way, however. Because the music-loathing biddy in the apartment above started banging on her floor with a broom handle. As neighbourliness is next but one to godliness, Abby made the ultimate ablutionary sacrifice by stopping mid-show tune. "Good morning, Letitia," she shouted at the ornate ceiling, only to receive a staccato response in pidgin Morse Code. Abby chuckled to herself, knowing full well that it was the *other* old biddy who was doing the banging and who *hated* being mistaken for Letitia. "Sorry," Abby shouted. "Good morning to you too, Bernice." A grumpy thump descended by way of reply.

Despite her neighbours' inability to appreciate good music, Abby wouldn't swap Letitia Trelawney and Bernice Brannigan for anything. Nosy, argumentative and interfering though they were, the old biddies knew everybody's business, were full of chat about what was what, told ribald stories about their seriously misspent youths and were as protective as she-lions towards the single woman beneath their feet. Abby assumed they'd heard about the horrid events in Carrickfergus, where she was viciously attacked by a pair of psychotic paramilitary thugs. But they never mentioned the sensitive subject, nor gave any indication that they were party to Abby's private life. They simply encouraged her to keep up the self-defence classes, as well as the rough, tough rowing sessions on the nearby River Lagan.

Looking at her toned body in the mirror, Abby was glad she'd decided to get fit and get real. She'd never felt so full of energy or looked as good as she did. Most of the weight she'd gained at university had been burned off in the busy, busy, busy world of business, though not as much as she'd have liked. Especially now that she was a television star and had to take care of her appearance. Well, okay, Abby wasn't exactly a star, more a regular on the local news bulletins. She supplied snappy soundbites when the BBC needed comments on business affairs, High Street happenings and entrepreneurial activities generally. She was the "face of business" in Belfast – big, bold, bright, beautiful. Her own business may have failed spectacularly, but Abby's reputation as a self-starting, give-it-a-go, don't-stop-me-now entrepreneur remained miraculously undimmed. If anything, ironically, it was enhanced by her company's controversial collapse, since she had parlayed the commercial disaster into a David-versus-Goliath epic and made her media reputation into the bargain. The fact that she turned out to be a natural on television was as welcome as it was unexpected. Things got better and better as she shed the pounds, smartened herself up, attended the media training courses, pre-prepared her off-the-cuff comments and did all the unnatural things that TV people do to appear natural on screen.

Just as well, then, that Abby was taking evening classes in psychology. Guerrilla Psychology, to be exact. She never did complete her Retail Marketing degree and, although formal qualifications made very little difference in the day-to-day, make-a-buck world of cut-and-thrust commerce, the fact that she'd failed to finish what she'd started nagged at her incessantly. Granted, it often stopped nagging on wet and windy nights, when it was time for class, Häagen-Dazs was in the fridge and a Bridget Jones-clone rom-com was on the box. But the threat of an imminent TV appearance, where the extra kilos always showed, plus the sheer pleasure of the part-time degree course, kept her backsliding in check and personal development on track.

Still, this was the first day of the rest of her life, as the old saying said. It *was* a beautiful morning, what's more. Wasn't it? Abby peeked through the heavy silk curtains of her big bay window, just to check that the dawn was following instructions.

A thick mist enveloped the boughs of the horse chestnuts opposite, like a clichéd CGI effect in a creepy Hollywood movie. The dawn was obviously having a lie-in, the lazybones.

No matter what the weather, Abby loved the humungous horse chestnuts across the street and the beautiful rose garden just beyond and the brassy Victorian bandstand beyond that, to say nothing of the boisterous rhododendron bushes and the aromatic hyacinths when in season and the curvilinear cast-iron Palm House and the oak, spruce and sycamore-studded green-sward of Belfast's Botanic Gardens, which were sprinkled during the summer with lovestruck couples, lazy students, energetic Frisbee throwers and buzzing swarms of uniformed schoolchildren. Come autumn, the season of mists and mellow fruitfulness, the deciduous parkland shed most of its visitors, leaving only evergreen dog-walkers and the cold-blooded senior citizens who flourished in the heat of its Tropical Ravine. Autumn was Abby's favourite time of year and kicking up plumes of fallen leaves was Abby's favourite pastime. Pity she didn't have a partner to kick with, or even a boyfriend. But after Dr Dave Kelley dropped out of her life in such a dramatic fashion, she'd no real desire to get involved with another heartbreaker. She'd had her business to run, which was a 24/7 operation. She'd had the emotional trauma of seeing her Web 2.0 dreams turn into an RL nightmare. She'd had the TV and the media and the evening classes and the weekly rowing with Ladies Who Launch and the daily struggle to look better than her best. There was little time left over for a significant other. Men were more trouble than they were worth. Who needs them? I mean, really.

Full-length mirrors never lie – except those slightly convex ones that sneaky retailers fit in ladies changing rooms – and Abby's was saying "lookin' good". She checked out her bottom and, while it wasn't exactly pert, it was an awful lot perter than before. She was tempted to give it an encouraging slap, but feared instigating some kind of subcutaneous avalanche that'd leave her with chronic, possibly terminal, cellulite and enormously swollen ankles that'd not only make buying boots a bitch but slap together like bell-bottoms as she walked. Indeed, if sufficient flab plummeted southwards she'd turn into one of those

lead-weighted, self-righting children's toys that can't be knocked over no matter how hard they're pushed. She'd roll backwards and forwards and backwards again, forever and a day. Might be handy on a hen night, though.

Running late, Abby scampered into her walk-in wardrobe, a bijou spare bedroom that had inexplicably filled itself with clothes racks and shoe boxes and handbag hooks and bulging chests of drawers. She struggled into her trusty magic knickers – a girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do, no matter how buff the butt – slipped on a plain white Dolce & Gabbana blouse and, after tugging the coat-hanger chorus-line back and forth and back again for what must have been a record number of curtain calls, finally settled on a classic Chanel two-piece suit in navy blue, with white twill trim. The shoes took forever, as Jimmy Choos are wont to do, but she opted for light grey slip-ons, which added a necessary touch of personality without compromising her team-player presentation-of-self. A string of cultured pearls, a pair of matching earrings and her favourite black rose brooch, a beautiful gift from a gentleman admirer, completed the dashing designer ensemble. She double-checked her make-up and close-cropped hair in the hall mirror, threw the Aquascutum trench coat over one arm, hooked her Chloé Paddington handbag around the other, briskly opened the front door and bounced down the wonderful wooden staircase that she shared with the apartment above and that abutted the apartment below.

The three-storey house was old and Victorian and filled with exquisite original features, not least the gleaming mahogany banister rail that generations of descending hands had turned silky to the touch. Big Victorian families were few and far between in the 21st century and the house had long since been converted into three separate apartments. Irascible top-floor neighbours notwithstanding, this arrangement didn't bother Abby in the least. On the contrary, it offered a modicum of company and companionship, while enabling her to live in a neighbourhood that she couldn't otherwise afford. Colenso Parade was not only the most desirable street in the Stranmillis area of South Belfast, because it overlooked Botanic Gardens, but Abby's end-of-terrace property was the most desirable house at the most desirable end of

the most desirable street in one of the most desirable parts of the city. Immediately adjacent to Queen's University, the Stranmillis district was chock-a-block with young professionals, resting actors, undiscovered artists, bohemian media types, middle-aged divorcees, spritely empty nesters and an eclectic mix of oddballs, weirdos, academics. Its steeply sloping streets – some tree lined, as God intended; others as naked as insurance companies with subsidence concerns insisted – were dotted with gigantic university buildings and gorgeous little shops and restaurants and rinky-dink retail outlets. Stranmillis, in short, was the perfect place for a singleton, close enough to the university to benefit from its intellectual buzz and hectic social life, yet far enough from the centre of the party-animal action to guarantee residents their full eight hours.

She'd almost reached the communal vestibule when one of Abby's ground-floor neighbours appeared at her front door, with a "we need to talk" expression on her face. Esther Island and her partner, Penny Farthing, were the polar opposites of the bolshie bruisers on the top floor – petite, reserved, demure, immaculately groomed in a fusty, old-fashioned, twinset-and-Tweed perfume way and probably impossibly pretty during the war when eligible bachelors were few in number and marriage-worthy men were completely non-existent. No change there, then. Abby assumed Esther and Penny were step-sisters, though she sometimes joked that she lived in the Zuider Zee. Surrounded by dykes.

Still, it was unusual to see either of them at this time of the morning and almost unprecedented for one to initiate a conversation. "Oh, hello Esther," Abby said, as she eased open the vestibule door, a William Morris-ish wonder in stained glass and leaded lights.

"It's Penny."

Whoops. "Sorry if my singing disturbed you, Penny."

"You didn't disturb us, Miss Maguire. Compared to the clodhoppers on the top floor, you are as dainty as a..."

"Rogue elephant?"

"Hardly," she smiled. "I just... we just... wanted to wish you well in your new job."

Understandably, Abby was a bit taken aback. Not only by the

forwardness of her ordinarily unforthcoming neighbours, but by the fact that they somehow knew it was her first day. "How did you find out?"

Still smiling, Penny's cornflower-blue eyes shone with good neighbourliness and with what, well, seemed to be you-go-girl, what-glass-ceiling, women-are-winners solidarity. "We're not completely out of touch, Miss Maguire."

"No, no, I didn't mean..."

"And, anyway, we read the morning paper. There's a piece about you in the early edition of the *Belfast Telegraph*."

"Not *another* article," Abby joked.

"Anyway, we simply want to wish you well. Esther worked there for a while and found it very... ah... bureaucratic. Hopefully you'll shake things up. Rattle a few cages, as they say. Watch your back, though."

"I'll do that, Penny. Thank you."

"No, thank *you*... Abby."

Touched by the old lady's support and the fact that a formerly stand-offish neighbour had used her forename for the first time, Abby closed the vestibule door behind her, opened the heavy front door with its enormous brass knocker in the shape of a lion's head, and skipped down the three granite steps to the fog-wreathed street.

"Belfast City Council, here I come."

Little did she know what horrors lay in wait.