

CHAPTER ONE

In another moment Alice was through the glass, and had jumped lightly down into the Looking-glass room.... the pictures on the wall next the fire seemed to be all alive.

Lewis Carroll

Robert Longone, Professor of Symbology at Harvard Business School, on his way to the cash registers at the *Centre Commercial du Louvre*, bumped his head on a strut of the *Pyramide Inversée*. This gigantic upside-down glass pyramid was an awkward way of getting light into the underground shopping mall. The Louvre Museum architect, Pei, had designed its faceted glass planes to descend from the ceiling, stopping in a point a few feet above the floor level. Beneath it a smaller solid right-side-up pyramid helped to prevent people from getting close enough to run into it. At 6'1", Robert Longone did not consider himself excessively tall, however, and he resented a little having to be more careful than definitively short people. *An efficient skylight, yes, and worth its weight as branding for the mall. But it dazzles the eye and makes it hard to concentrate on the merchandise. Or if you actually think about what you're buying, you run into the darned thing.* He'd nearly dropped the Georges de la Tour coffee mug.

The choice of Paris for the June ERP Accounting and Asset Tracking conference this year had been satisfactory, though Robert Longone (unlike many of his colleagues) had not had a chance to share the beauty of the City of Light with a significant other. He was thirty-six years old, unmarried and, for the moment, free of any romantic relationships. Somehow all the women he met were too young, too busy, or too ambitious for serious purposes. Still, he had enjoyed yesterday afternoon, after the conference's closing session, wandering the streets, peeking into the shops and tiny supermarkets to sample their labeling and shelf-space practices, getting a haircut. Today, Monday, he had set aside mostly for visiting the Louvre. He had seen all the masterpieces on his list and some he hadn't even heard of, like the Georges de la Tour painting of a woman holding a skull and staring at a candle.

The person behind him in line bumped his back gently and apologized in some strange language. Robert glanced over his shoulder and saw that there was already a longish line behind him. In front there were only two more, now. *I really should have taken a shopping basket. Too late now.*

He contemplated the Mona Lisa mousepad he was buying for his niece Jenny. The crowd management at the Mona Lisa approach had impressed him deeply.

Disneyworld, eat your heart out! If only you could line your attraction approaches with twelve-foot-high 17th-century paintings.... Interesting paintings, too, Bible stories and all that by painters I never heard of, like Caravaggio. The key is to have something people have never seen before, but it also has to be something really worth looking at.

Hmm... now, Disney could try twelve-foot-high rear-projection screens showing old Duck and Mouse cartoons, silents maybe, for people to watch while they waited....

Forehead itches.

Robert juggled his double armful of purchases and found the medieval reproduction ivory mirror. It was too small to give him a view of his entire face, but he knew the whole well enough to understand how the segments fit together.

His forehead had not been skinned by the encounter with the *Pyramide Inversée*, but he could see a ruddy crease above his right eyebrow. It didn't look as if it would bruise. He wished he could touch it but he could only look, since he was holding a boxed paperweight and the Mona Lisa mousepad tucked between his body and the arm holding the mirror.

He checked his teeth for bits of lunch, which he had eaten in the Museum itself, in a café. He congratulated himself for having his goatee shaved off yesterday, when he got the haircut. He had a good chin, after all—he didn't need that thing. He had retained a neat dark brown moustache, which was good for keeping students' eyes focused on his mouth, and therefore on what was coming out of it. The salon girl had been very clever, telling him in *Franglais* that he didn't need to comb the front hair back over the potential bald spot, not yet, not for years yet. He kept visualizing his Dad's bald spot, and he was overcompensating, probably. He winked one grey eye at himself in the mirror and slid it back into its box.

He had reached the check-out. He dumped his treasure on the counter and surreptitiously stretched his arms. The cashier

methodically arranged the items with the barcode labels facing up, ready for her handheld barcode reader. He glanced at her with approval, and noticed that she was a very attractive redhead.

She was more elegantly dressed than he would expect in a store clerk. She would not be out of place in a boardroom. Her deep red hair was beautifully rolled up in a smooth coiffure. He met her eyes, which were startlingly green. More makeup than he liked in a woman, but still that heart-shaped mouth in a heart-shaped face was very pleasant to look at. She did not smile but took his Visa and began checking his purchases, softly reciting the names and prices as her scanner read them.

Robert wondered if she knew that he understood French—at least, he knew the numbers and he recognized the names of the items when he was looking at them as she spoke. He thrilled to realize that she was muttering conversions—not only the euros price which showed on the cash register readout, but also the French Francs price. *Accurate, too. Do they train cashiers to do that or is she performing some private ritual?*

She scanned the tiny magnetic Venus de Milo for which he would find some use or other, a packet of *Raft of the Medusa* cocktail napkins, and the Mesopotamian Legal Contract paperweight, representing a lump of clay with cuneiform writing. He had not been able to resist it in the shop, though he had skipped the Mesopotamian galleries, thinking an American might not be welcome there this year. He had hesitated for a long time between the Mesopotamian Legal Contract and some other paperweights, two metal globes labeled Terrestrial Orb and Celestial Orb. But he had no use or room (or budget) for *two*

paperweights, and they seemed to him to be a pair. So the Mesopotamian Legal Contract would be his desktop conversation piece.

Then there was the blue Egyptian Lotus cup or chalice thing for his sister—an expensive and fragile item. He was already planning how to pad it with his underwear in the carryon going home. She would eat it up. She was into Grails this year. The reproduction ivory mirror would be a Christmas gift for her. *Two gifts for Nell in one shopping trip, very efficient.*

The cashier paused over the coffee mug and looked up, approvingly. “*Ah, la Madeleine.*”

“*Pardon, excusez-moi, je ne comprends pas.*” O.K., he had been working on his French, but had no idea what she was talking about. There was a church called *La Madeleine* somewhere in Paris—he remembered seeing it on the Paris by Night bus tour, a vague impression of something like the Supreme Court building in D.C., enormous, all columns with triangles on top.

“You’re American?” She sounded rather American herself, in English. Obviously he sounded American in French. “The painting of Mary Magdalen by Georges de la Tour. On your cup.”

“Is that who she is? I didn’t have time to check, but I liked the painting. That’s why I bought this book, to back it up, learn a little more. She’s in there, too. I checked.” Robert patted the volume of *Masterpieces of Painting in the Louvre Museum*, a bit heavy but it probably wouldn’t put him over his weight allowance on the flight home tomorrow.

“Yes, she is a repentant Magdalen. Unusual, since she has such dark hair. There are many paintings of Mary Magdalen, you

know. She's in nearly every crucifixion scene ever painted, of course, and then in many other scenes in the life of Christ, besides being presented as an icon, a saint to be revered. In so many of those images she is blonde or red-haired." She angled her head, letting the light catch her own smooth, brilliant red hair.

Is she flirting? Robert shifted gears and got ready to say something along the lines of "I like red hair myself." However, she didn't pause and he realized she belonged to a type he knew well from Harvard—a type to which he himself perhaps belonged. The type of person who knows a lot about a topic and is just itching to download it for your entertainment.

"Georges de la Tour painted four—no, five!—different dark-haired Magdalens. He was not a court painter, and probably he used whatever model he could get. You can see that he worked from models. He may have been in the first generation of painters to use a *camera obscura* to train his hand in drawing."

"A *camera obscura*? That's Italian, or Latin—dark camera, dark room?"

"It's Latin, and it is a dark room."

"A darkroom for photography? But Georges de la Tour certainly was not taking photographs with cameras in the Middle Ages?"

"He lived in the 17th century. In France we generally count the end of the Middle Ages with Francis the First, who was born in 1494. In art history, Georges de la Tour would be classified as 'baroque' for his lighting and his preference for peasant-type models."

Robert nodded. He felt the person behind him in line growing restless, muttering in the unknown language, but this was interesting, the kind of thing he had bought the book to learn. He stood with his shoulders at their broadest, protecting the talkative cashier, who clearly knew something about art, from the sight of the long line of waiting customers.

"This 'dark room' was not exactly for photography as we know it. His *camera obscura* would have been a kind of photographic studio in which the only way to print the picture was to trace it. The principles of the technology were known to the ancient Greeks, and probably before then, but painters probably didn't figure out how to make use of it until the 17th century. You arrange and light what you want to draw in one room, and then you use a partition or curtain to create a second, completely dark room. In the partition or curtain there is one small pinhole. Through that pinhole the light comes, showing an inverted image of what is in the other room."

"An inverted image—you mean upside down?"

"Well, yes, of course. What else would I mean— a mirror image? Alice's looking-glass land? You know that our eyes see things upside down, too, and camera lenses of any kind...."

Yes, young lady, I know it perfectly well. How charmingly you scold me. "So it is a camera in fact. A camera without lens or film, nothing but the aperture and the dark box."

"Yes." She had scanned the mug and the big book. Robert considered how to prolong the lecture.

"So he traced the picture? Like one of those children's toys that lets you trace a projected image?"

“Yes, though he would have had to use mirrors to get it right side up. There’s your looking-glass. The mirrors did the work the brain does for our eyes. The use of the *camera obscura* would train the artist’s hand to drawing human beings in perspective. But for a painting like this, it might have been used to prepare the sketch directly on the canvas.”

“But wouldn’t that be cheating?”

She laughed. “So why did you buy the mug and the book? Georges de la Tour’s vision of the Magdalen is unique. Museum-goers here, and in New York, and Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., all stop before these paintings and feel something within them change. Do you think he cheated you?”

“No.” Robert made a mental note to find out about the American paintings, and asked, “Have you seen the ones in the U.S.? Are they different from this one, or identical?” *Were you studying art history in the States, and that’s why you sound American?* “It’s odd to think that this is like a photograph, that there was once a real woman holding a real skull staring at an actual candle, back in the baroque 17th century.” *At least I know how to listen to a woman.*

Her scanner moaned and beeped. Robert Longone glanced down at the Mona Lisa mousepad, the last item, which was giving the scanner trouble.

“Let me see this.” He took the mousepad, which was in a plastic bag, smoothed the barcode label with his strong fingers, and held the scanner to it carefully. The machine beeped gratefully. The girl smiled at him. Then he caught sight of the readout on the cash register. She followed his glance and gasped.

"I guess it must be an original Leonardo da Vinci, then," Robert said.

"Exactly. I mean, it's in the same ballpark, anyway."

"A nice *round* number!"

"Pi million," they both said almost at the same time, and laughed.

The readout showed 3.141.592,65. *The French are so stubborn they use commas and periods backwards. Really they should reprogram their cash registers here, for us Americans to understand. Well, when in Rome....*