

Chapter 1

If you looked up nerd in the dictionary, you would find a picture of Ryan. He wasn't a truly bad kid, it's just his frame grew faster than his body. He was all angles, knees, and elbows. His face was a constant battleground between his pimples and his oily hair. In a high school of over 2,000 students, he had maybe three friends. In the hallways, he was the constant target of every jock and wannabe. His tall frame and light body would fly easily into the lockers with a loud, satisfying crash every time.

One might think he'd make up his short comings by being a brilliant student. Quite the contrary, he barely passed his classes, rarely did homework, and showed a complete disinterest in anything having to do with school. Each grade period was an exhausting letdown for his tired mother. She had talked to the teachers, for years, and found nothing to motivate her only son. He did well enough to keep in school, but only that. His teachers were either through with him or so new from the teaching college that they didn't have the skills to handle a Ryan. None of them inspired, none of them motivated, and none of them would make a lasting presence in his memory as he grew older.

The one thing that truly motivated Ryan, other than faking being sick and staying home all day watching cartoons, was the local bookstores, of which there were many. It was the sixties, long before the big chains and Amazon put a stake in the heart of the specialty bookstore. He would visit these regularly and pour over the new offerings.

Ryan had made a little cash by mowing his neighbor's lawn. He didn't do a particularly good job, but the neighbor was old and happy something was done. When he went to give Ryan the five bucks for that week, he had made a mistake and had given him a fifty. Ryan was dishonest enough to not point out this error and happily made his way to the book shops.

I was a slow week and not much had come in. The remainder tables were equally as disappointing. Just as he was about to quit and go home, he noticed a new section had been carved out of one of his favorite hangouts. Spirituality, the sign said. He walked over to the shelves and found a selection of books about Eastern mysticism and yoga. Disappointed, he was about to go when he spied an old tan volume in the group with no name on the binder. He pulled the book from the shelf and flipped it open. It appeared to be in Latin, a language he knew little of. Inside were marvelous wood block prints to go along with the text. He flipped to the back page. The store had marked it in pencil at 130 dollars. Making sure no one was watching, he carefully erased the zero with his pencil. He smudged the number a little with his thumb, so it looked like the erasure was just a little discoloration. He took his prize up to the counter where he found the clerk at the register. Since the part time clerk was disinterested in anything that didn't involve girls or cars, he rang the book up for thirteen dollars and gave Ryan his change from the fifty.

Ryan took his prize home and studied each print. They formed a story he could only guess at. Frustrated, he went to the bookcase in the livingroom and pulled the Latin dictionary his Mom had used in Catholic school. He took both books to his bedroom and closed the door. He tried to read the book, but the text was in script. It had faded to a brown over the years and was hard to make out. He stared at the prints which had caught his eye in the bookstore, again. The prints were beautifully done and the black of the ink still stood out. He quickly grew bored and placed his treasure on his bookshelf where his mother was unlikely to see it. He took the dictionary back to the livingroom, grabbed a soda, flopped onto the couch, and started watching cartoons on the TV.

The book stayed in his possession for five months. One afternoon, when he was out of

pot, he remembered the book on the shelf. He pulled it out and stuck it in his nap sack. Ryan left the house and made his way downtown, to the pricier book shops. There he tried to sell it to the kid at the counter. He wasn't buying, but gave him the number of a guy who might, named Marshall.

Ryan called Marshall, and they met at the local diner. Ryan passed the book and Marshall began to examine it closely.

"What do you want for it?" he asked.

"I paid over a hundred for it," Ryan lied, "I just want to break even."

"I see," Marshall answered. Ryan didn't even try to change the thirteen-dollar mark back to one hundred thirty dollars. "Why are you selling it?"

Ryan's voice dropped, "I'm out of weed."

Marshall smiled, "I'm short on cash, but I just got a fat lid. Four fingers. Do you want to trade?"

Ryan thought for a minute. He didn't look at the book anymore and a four-finger lid would keep him well buzzed for a long time. He stuck out his hand. They shook and Marshall told him to wait in the diner. Five minutes later he was back with the lid in a brown paper bag. Ryan inspected its contents and nodded. Marshall took the book and Ryan left.

Marshall paid the tab and walked out of the diner. He placed a call at a pay phone to a detective he worked with and gave him Ryan's description. The detective assured him he would have his dope back by nightfall, ready for the next stoner. Marshall got into his old Ford and drove home.

When he examined the book closely, he realized that it was written in French, but not modern French. I was going to be a bear to translate. The covers were odd. They weren't leather,

but they weren't lambskin either. It most closely resembled pig skin, but it wasn't that, either. The pages were vellum, a good sign as to its age. That it wasn't printed was problematic. It wasn't illuminated, like an old monastery work. There were no dates of any kind, so I would have to be dated by content and composition. His study was interrupted by the doorbell. Marshall opened the door and was greeted by Detective Green.

"Hey Marsh."

"Hey Green. Did you get him?"

"Of course. He didn't even get to roll a joint." Green handed Marshall his bag of pot back. "What did he pay?"

"We traded for an old book. Once I have it identified, we should make a killing."

"Damn, I was hoping for cash."

"Me too, but this book is special, so I was willing to take the risk. We'll split after the sale, like always."

Green nodded. "Do you have any more setup?"

"Not right now. The kid was a call out of the blue. Maybe if the Feds tighten up again, demand will increase."

"Okay. I've got a few in the works, so keep your phone free."

"Will do, Green. Take it easy, man."

"I always do. Goodnight Marsh."

Green walked back to his unmarked squad car. Marshall laughed a little. It was obviously a cop car. Anybody with any skill could see that. Unmarked just meant it wasn't black and white. He and Green had a good deal going. Green had busted him on a drug sale and turned him into a source. Marshall kept selling that same fat lid to dozens of dumb high school kids and Green got

the collars and the promotions. They split the proceeds. It was illegal as hell, as they both knew, but it paid well. Green got a better house and Marshall was able to fence things, which had more appeal and profit than dealing.

Marshall walked back and looked at the book again. He would have to take it to the university. He had enough contacts on campus that someone could steer him to a discrete translation. He was fascinated by the materials used. He didn't recognize the faded ink or the cover material. The plates and book pages were of the same approximate age, but their conditions differed so much. He locked the book into his safe with the weed and turned in for the night.

Chapter 2

The grad student handed Marshall back the book. “No way, man. This is way out of my league. You’ll need a prof to translate it.”

“Shit. Any idea who?”

“It’s gotta be Dr. Petit. He’s the only one around here with the background.”

“Is he cool?”

“He’s banging one of his under grads, Jessica Malloy. He’ll be cool.”

Marshall thanked him and gave him a twenty for the info. He walked to the student union, grabbed a course list, and took a seat. As he scanned the students, he appeared to be reading the list.

“Bingo,” he thought. Jessica was on the other side of the store. He got up and walked up to her.

“Hi Jess!”

She turned around. “Oh, hi Marsh. I didn’t know you were a student here.”

He smiled, slyly. “You know I’m not. How’s your Dad?”

“Still wants to shoot you dead for banging his little girl.”

“Still?”

“Well, you were the first.”

“But not the last, from what I hear.”

“What do you want, Marsh?” she frowned.

“I need a book translated.”

“So? Pay a service.”

“Not this book. It’s special.”

“How special?”

“About forty special.”

“You want Petit? Make it one hundred special.”

“Fifty, and you’re busting my balls.”

“As I recall, I already did that. Seventy five or go find yourself another girl.”

“Fine. This is a bit of a rush. When do I meet him?”

“Tomorrow. I’ll need to prep him tonight.”

“Well, don’t get him too tired. I need him to work. See ya, Jess.”

“Um, Marsh?” she held out her hand.

He counted seventy five dollars out. “You don’t miss a trick, do you?”

“Not since I was tricked.”

Marshall smiled again and walked away. He had the rest of the afternoon to kill. He spotted a young coed. She was a little heavy and wore glasses. He bought a cup of coffee and a pastry and sat down next to her. He started a conversation with her, gave her the coffee and Danish, and they left together to finish the conversation at his place. They made out a bit, then Marshall made her a fettuccini dinner. He was in her pants before she knew what happened and she spent a very enjoyable night with her new friend.