

Author's Introduction

This was the very first version of chapter one, and as you can probably tell, it's very different from the way chapter one finally turned out in the published book. At this stage, the book was still in third person point of view, but that changed fairly quickly since it didn't feel right to me. Rookie went by the nickname "Twist" instead since I thought the novel *Oliver Twist* would play a big role. It didn't, obviously, and that idea hit the cutting room floor by the time I wrote version two. Also, another big difference is Deeter's character. Deeter was much quieter in this early version, speaking with hoarse whispers and sneaking about like an invisible ghost. He let me know right away that I'd gotten him completely wrong, which led to his cannon ball entrance in later drafts. At this point, the book itself didn't even have a title.

Chapter One The Finder's Penny

The last thing the boy could remember was the penny.

He wasn't sure why he'd noticed the penny at all, except that there was something a little off about it. The shape was right, but the color was a dull bronze-brown rather than a gleaming copper, so he picked it up off the street.

At first he thought it was a fake—there was the profile of an Indian's head where Lincoln should have been—and then he thought maybe it was foreign money, except that curving around sides were the words "United States of America." At the bottom was a date: 1899. On the back were two more words—ONE CENT—and these were surrounded by a wreath of some sort and a small shield. The penny's weight felt right in his hand, and even though it was very old, it was still an American coin. So, what made the penny seem so wrong?

That was as far as his memory went. Now he didn't know where he was, or what date it was. He couldn't even remember his name.

Wherever he was, it was very dark, and the air smelled dusty and stale. He was lying on something soft and a little lumpy. He groaned, and then somewhere out of sight, someone spoke very softly.

"Hey Sweet Pea, better get in here. The new kid's awake."

Curtains were drawn back suddenly, filling the whole room with light. He was lying on a shabby, green velvet couch, and there was a girl standing beside the couch's armrest. She seemed to be thirteen or fourteen years old, and she looked Asian. Her cheeks pinkened a little and she smiled.

"We've been waiting for you to wake up for a long time," she said.

"Ask him if he remembers anything," the small hoarse whisper said.

"Quiet, Deeter. If the Rag Man's brought him here, then he doesn't remember anything, and you know it." She turned back to him. "Don't be scared. None of us remember who we are either. You'll get used to it. But first, you need a nickname. How about—"

"How about sneeze? Or fart?" The whisper laughed uncontrollably. Sweet Pea rolled her eyes.

“Don’t mind Deeter,” she said. “He’s only ten. He’s not mature like you and me yet.”

“I’m mature!”

“We’ll call you Twist.” Sweet Pea pressed her lips a little, and the matter was settled.

Twist tried to sit up, but plopped back down with a groan. “What’s going on?”

“You’re in the Rag Man’s world now, and the Rag Man’s king in the Rag Man’s world.”

The whisper was almost singing the words.

“Who?”

“The Rag Man,” Sweet Pea said. “But we can talk about him later. Are you hungry? Deeter, get him something to eat. I’ll be right back.” She smiled at Twist, and then she went out the door.

“So what do you want, Twist?”

Twist tried again to sit up, and this time he was successful. The room was the strangest he’d ever seen. It looked like an attic that had been filled with the remnants of some museum’s junk sale. There was hardly any space to walk at all between all the wooden crates and statues and suits of armor that cluttered the floor. In one corner of the room was a purple pinball machine; next to this was a coat rack filled with red feather boas. There were shelves leaning against every wall, and these were crammed with all sorts of oddities—jars of mummified frogs, dusty old dictionaries, ancient Greek vases, elephant figurines, deflated basketballs, yellowing paper scrolls, carnival masks, and more.

But despite, or perhaps because of, all the disorder in the room, Twist couldn’t see any other person with him.

“Deeter?” Twist turned his head back and forth.

“I’m over here, man.”

The whisper came from the center of the room, where there was a small round table covered with a tablecloth that looked like a stained glass window that had been transformed into fabric.

“Have a seat,” Deeter said.

“Why can’t I see you? Is this some trick?” Twist sat down at the table and rubbed his head. He had a wicked headache.

Deeter laughed again, and then suddenly he was sitting in the chair opposite Twist. He was small—even for a ten-year-old—with brown skin and bright brown eyes.

“What do you want to eat?” he asked.

“How did you...”

Deeter held up an orange plastic ring, which he slipped onto his thumb and vanished. When he reappeared, he was holding the ring once more.

“What do you think of that?” Deeter asked. “Not even Sweet Pea has a collector’s item like this, not even after finding the umbrella. Rag Man said this came from the Illusionist himself. I got it for finding the phone book, and believe me, that was not easy. The Librarian really knows how to hide things.”

Twist blinked a few times.

Deeter grinned, and then he looked at the tablecloth. “Give me a cheeseburger, with fries, no pickles, no onions.”

A blue plate appeared in front of Deeter with a cheeseburger and fries on it, but no pickles, and no onions.

Twist fell out of his chair.

“Deeter,” Sweet Pea said from the doorway, “stop freaking Twist out.”

She walked over to the table and helped Twist back to his chair. “Give me a glass of water,” she said quietly, and when one appeared on the table, she handed it to Twist along with two aspirins.

“Deeter thinks it all a big game, just cuz he’s got some stupid plastic ring that the Illusionist made. Supposedly.”

“No supposedly about it. This ring is one hundred percent—”

He broke off suddenly, and his eyes fixed on the white swan feather Sweet Pea had taken out of the pocket of her red sweater.

“Do you really want to play a game of objects right now, Deeter?”

He sank a little lower in his chair.

“I thought not,” Sweet Pea said, returning the feather to its place.

Twist leaned closer to Deeter and asked, “why are you scared of a feather?”

Deeter shook his head. “Man, you do not want to know.”

Sweet Pea had joined them at the table. She folded her hands very properly in her lap and cleared her throat.

“Twist—”

“Why do you keep calling me that?” Twist asked, rubbing his head.

“Deeter, get Twist’s backpack. I think the Rag Man put it in with the tea cups.”

Deeter hopped down from the chair and started rifling through a wooden crate nearby.

“Let’s begin at the beginning,” Sweet Pea said. “What’s the last thing you remember? A penny, right?”

“How did you know?” Twist asked.

“That’s how the Rag Man works. He sets out the Finder’s penny and waits for someone to find it. In this case, you. And that means you’re a Finder, like the rest of us.”

“A Finder?”

“Someone who is good at finding Collector’s items. Weird stuff that can do weird things, like Deeter’s plastic ring that makes him invisible, and this tablecloth that makes food.”

Twist touched the tablecloth lightly with his fingertips. “Are they magic?”

“Sort of. I’m sure you’ve heard about some Collector’s items from stories and fairytales. The tablecloth, Deeter’s ring, even my feather, are just little things though. There are much more powerful items out there in the world, and there are a lot of people who want them. Dangerous people, mostly. You were lucky the Rag Man found you. He’s dangerous too, but he treats his Finders well enough. Other Finders aren’t so lucky.”

Deeter plunked a large blue backpack in front of Twist.

“Found it,” Deeter said. “Like always.”

Sweet Pea unzipped the bag and emptied its contents onto the table, including a paperback book, which she handed to Twist.

“This is why I called you Twist.”

Twist studied the book and frowned. It felt familiar somehow, but he couldn’t quite make the connection. The title of the book was *Oliver Twist*, and written on the inside flap was the inscription “Happy birthday, with love, Mom and Dad.”

The rest of Twist’s things—a black notebook with lined paper, a few pencils, and a soggy peanut butter and jelly sandwich—provided no clue about his identity.

“Why can’t I remember anything?” Twist asked. “My family, my life, my name.... Was it that penny?”

“No,” Sweet Pea said, exchanging looks with Deeter. “The penny didn’t take your

memory. The Rag Man did.”

“What! He can’t do that! He can’t kidnap me and take away my memory!” Twist banged his fists on the table, and then he winced. “Who does he think he is?”

“You can ask him yourself,” Sweet Pea said. “He wants to see you now.”