

Author's Introduction

In this second version, the point of view switched to first person, which felt more appropriate and natural to me. You'll probably notice that certain details like descriptions and plot actions are more recognizable, but they appear in different places within the chapter. At this stage, the book's title was *The Bronze Crown and the Book of All Words* in my notes. Quite a mouthful, don't you think?

Chapter One The Finder's Penny

The only thing I can remember about my past is a penny.

Truthfully, I'm not even sure why I remember the penny at all. It was in the gutter by the side of the road, stuck in the mud with a bunch of wet twigs and trashed candy wrappers. Probably a million people walked by it that day without seeing it.

And then I came along.

I got a strange feeling when I saw it, like something jumped inside me, so I bent down to pick it up. Its shape was right, but the color was weird. Most pennies are a bright copper color, and even dirty pennies are a normal-looking brown, but this one was a dull bronze color. At first, I thought it was fake money. Where President Lincoln's head should have been, there was the profile of an Indian's head instead.

Then I thought maybe it was foreign money, except that curving around the 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, and even though it was really old, it was still an American coin. So, what made the penny seem so wrong? So out of place?

I just don't know, and that's where my memory stops.

Now I can't even remember my name.

For a while, I thought that memory about the penny was a dream, because next I was waking up. Wherever I was, it was really dark, and the air smelled old. I was lying on something soft and lumpy. My throat was dry, so when I groaned, it sounded like a croak. Then somewhere out of sight, someone spoke in a small hoarse whisper.

"Psst! Hey Sweet Pea, better get in here. The new boy's awake."

Curtains were flung back suddenly, stirring the dust motes in the air and filling the whole space with light. I was in some sort of a living room lying on a shabby, green velvet sofa, and beside the sofa's armrest stood an Asian girl. She was dressed in a pair of blue jeans and a soft, pink hoodie. She looked thirteen or fourteen years old.

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

I blinked a few times. "I don't know..."

She leaned over to feel my forehead. Her hand was cool and kind of nice. She looked into my eyes.

"No concussion," she said. "That's good."

She was staring at me, so I stared back, and then she blushed as pink as her hoodie.

"You'll be fine," she said quickly, and she glanced away.

I tried to sit up, but that didn't work out too well for me. The more I tried to lift my head,

the more it pounded. Finally, I just gave up and kept still. My skin tingled all over, and I felt jumpy way deep down inside me, like someone kept creeping up on me to scare me from behind.

“I feel like I’ve lost something,” I said.

It was very quiet in the room. Sweet Pea frowned and shrugged.

“You won’t miss it,” she said, “after a while.”

Then I really did jump, because this other kid vaulted over the sofa’s back and plopped down on the cushion next to my feet. At first, he was just an orange blur, but then my eyes focused a little better and I realized it was only his orange T-shirt. His skin was light brown, and he was kind of small, but that didn’t stop him from landing like a canon ball.

“Ask him if he remembers anything, Sweet Pea,” he said, grinning at me.

“Quiet, Deeter,” Sweet Pea said. “If the Ragman’s brought him here, then he doesn’t remember anything, and you know it.” She turned back to me. “Don’t be scared. None of us remember who we are either. Really, you’ll get used to it. My name’s Sweet Pea, and he’s Deeter.”

Deeter was still grinning at me. His hair was full of tight black curls, like little springs, and his brown eyes were quick and bright.

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

“I’m mature!” Deeter yelled.

“Where am I?” I asked.

“You’re in the Ragman’s world,” Deeter started chanting, “and the Ragman is King in the Ragman’s world.”

“Who?” I asked.

“The Ragman,” Sweet Pea said. “But we can talk about him later. I’d better go tell him you’re awake. Are you hungry? Deeter, get him something to eat.”

As soon as Sweet Pea had left the room, Deeter sighed.

“She’s so bossy. Deeter do this, Deeter do that...”

I tried to sit up again, and this time I made it. I couldn’t help groaning, though.

“So,” Deeter said, “you hungry? I can get you anything you want.”

“Just water.”

“Water? That’s easy.”

Deeter walked to the center of the living room, where there was a small round table covered with a tablecloth that looked like a stained glass window transformed into fabric.

“Come and have a seat,” he said.

Walking wasn’t so easy for me, though, and it wasn’t just because of my wicked headache. The room was a mess—there was hardly any space to walk at all. Heavy wooden crates and stuffed cardboard boxes cluttered the floor. Every wall was lined with shelves crammed with all sorts of crazy things—jars of mummified frogs, dusty old dictionaries, ancient Greek vases, elephant figurines, deflated footballs, yellowing paper scrolls, carnival masks... In one corner of the room was a purple pinball machine; next to this was a coat rack filled with feather boas and bowler hats. Next to that was a suit of knight’s armor. The whole place looked like an attic that had been filled with the remnants of a museum’s junk sale.

Finally, I managed to sit in one of the chairs at the table.

“Hey tablecloth,” Deeter said, “please give me one glass of water for my new friend here.”

I thought it was a magic trick, what happened next. I swear there was nothing on the table

except the tablecloth when I sat down. But after Deeter said this, a glass of water was there. There were no sounds or lights or anything. It just appeared. Out of nowhere. I glanced at Deeter.

“It’s all right,” he said. “Go ahead. Drink up.”

“How’d you do that?”

Deeter grinned. “Check this out.”

He held up an orange plastic ring, like one of those toys they give away in cereal boxes.

“Looks like an ordinary ring, right?” Deeter said.

Then he slipped it onto his thumb and vanished. No sound. No flash. No smoke.

Just gone.

When he reappeared, he was holding the ring again.

“What’d you think of that?” Deeter laughed. “Not even Sweet Pea has a collectible like this, not even after finding the kitchen broom. Ragman 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.”

“Who? What?”

Deeter grinned, and then he looked at the tablecloth. “Hey, tablecloth. Please make me a cheeseburger pancake, with peanut-butter fries, no pickles, no onions.”

A blue plate appeared in front of Deeter with a cheeseburger pancake on it and a side of peanut-butter covered fries, but no pickles, and no onions.

I was lying on the floor after that. I think I fell out of my chair. I got a really good look at the underside of the table, though, and it looked completely normal. No secret panels or hidden compartments.

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

She walked over to the table and helped me get back to my chair.

“Are you okay?” she asked me.

“Oooo,” Deeter said. “She likes you. She’s never been this nice to a newbie before.”

“Shut up, Deeter.” Sweet Pea rolled her eyes.

“Sweet Pea and the new kid sittin’ in a tree. K-I-S-S-I-N—”

“I said shut up, Deeter!”

Deeter stopped singing, but he was grinning all over like maybe he was still singing it in his head.

“Deeter thinks this whole thing is all a big game,” Sweet Pea said, “just cuz he’s got some stupid plastic ring that the Illusionist made. Supposedly.”

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

From the pocket of her hoodie, Sweet Pea pulled out a white swan feather. She held it up towards Deeter, waving it lightly in the air a few times. Deeter’s mouth snapped shut.

“Do you really want to play a game of collectibles right now, Deeter?” Sweet Pea asked.

He sank a little lower in his chair.

“I thought not.” Sweet Pea smiled and returned the feather to its place.

“Why are you scared of a feather?” I asked.

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

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

“Let’s begin at the beginning,” she said. “What’s the last thing you remember? A strange-looking penny, right?”

“How’d you know?” I asked.

“That’s how the Ragman 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 Deeter and me.”

“A Finder?”

“Someone who is good at finding collectibles. Weird stuff that can do weird things, like Deeter’s plastic ring that makes him invisible, and the penny that finds Finders and this tablecloth that makes food. Like most of the stuff in this room. Can’t you feel it? Can’t you feel how there’s something different about everything here? Something a little...off?”

I remembered the jumpy feeling I had inside me when I was on the couch. I could still feel it if I paid attention. “I guess.”

“The world is full of special items,” she said, “but they’re usually hidden, and normal people don’t really even know they exist. We call them collectibles.”

I laid my hand on the tablecloth, and the skin on my palm tingled.

“Where do they come from?” I asked.

“The Artisans make them. I don’t know much about the Artisans. No one does, really. There are lots of theories, of course. Some say the Artisans are gods or angels or wizards. Others say they’re a bunch of scientists who discovered the secrets of the supernatural. Me? I don’t say anything. All I know is they create the stuff. 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 Ragman found you. He’s dangerous too, but he treats his Finders well. Other Finders aren’t so lucky.”

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

“No,” Sweet Pea said, exchanging looks with Deeter. “The Finder’s penny didn’t take your memory. The Ragman did.”

“You keep talking about the Ragman, but who is he?”

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