

CHAPTER ONE

Despised by All, Pitied by None

On a date long forgotten, in a poor town in England, a boy was born in a workhouse. There was almost no story to tell. For the first minutes of Oliver's life were almost his last. His breaths came slowly until he finally sneezed and let out a long wail. This let the poor workers know that they had another mouth to feed. As Oliver gave proof of the power of his lungs, a pale face lifted from the pillow. "Let me see my child before I die." The surgeon had been sitting by the fire. "You must not talk about dying yet," he said. "Bless her dear heart," said a nurse. She deposited Oliver in the woman's arms.

The mother pressed her pasty lips to Oliver's forehead, passed her hands over his face, then fell back onto the pillow and died. "It's all over," said the surgeon. "You needn't send for me if the baby cries. Just feed it gruel." He paused and looked at the woman. "Where did she come from? She was quite pretty." The nurse scooped the baby into her arms. "She was brought here last night. She was found lying in the street. Her soles were worn through. Her feet bloodied. Where she was walking to nobody knows." The nurse wrapped the baby in a blanket. She put him down to rest. She knew he'd be despised by all and pitied by none. Just like all the people of the workhouses were. When Oliver was about ten months old, he was sent to another workhouse. This workhouse was run by a woman named Mrs. Mann. Mrs. Mann was in charge of twenty-five children.

Do not be fooled into thinking Mrs. Mann loved—or even liked—children. She took them in because she was paid to do so. Part of her payment was to feed and clothe the children. Being a greedy woman, she kept all the money for herself. Oliver and the others got used to going to bed with empty bellies. Word would come to Mrs. Mann when an inspection was to take place. It was only at these times the children were bathed, spruced up, and given a full meal. When Oliver Twist was nine, the head of the workhouse, Mr. Bumble, paid a surprise visit to Mrs. Mann. "Oliver Twist is nine today," said Mr. Bumble. "We never did figure out who his father or mother were." Mrs. Mann raised her hands in astonishment. "How does he have any name at all?" "I named him," said Mr. Bumble. "We name the children in alphabetical order. The child before him was Swubble.

Then a *T* was due. So, I named him Twist. Oliver is too old to stay here. It's time he moved back to the house he was born into. I've come to take him." "I'll fetch him myself," said Mrs. Mann. After a quick cleaning of his outer layer, Oliver was brought before Mr. Bumble. "Make a bow to the man, Oliver," Mrs. Mann said. Oliver quickly bowed his head. "Will you come with me, Oliver?" asked Mr. Bumble. Before he answered, Oliver saw Mrs. Mann shaking her fist as a warning to the young boy. Oliver was used to her threats. "Will she be going with me?" he asked. "I'm afraid not," said Mr. Bumble. Although Oliver was not sad to be leaving Mrs. Mann, he quickly pretended to be sad at the sight of her shaking fist. Mrs. Mann shoved him off with a thousand embraces and a piece of bread and butter. She couldn't have Oliver appearing too hungry when he arrived at the

workhouse. As the gate closed behind them, Oliver felt a sudden sadness in leaving behind the only friends he had ever known. Oliver was immediately brought before a council of ten men at the workhouse. They decided that Oliver should start work the very next day. Life in the workhouse was hard. Meals were limited to once a day with the rare exception of a holiday here and there. The boys ate in a large stone hall. A copper stove stood at one end with a master constantly stirring the gruel in it. There was never a need to wash the bowls, as the boys licked them clean. Oliver and his friends suffered a slow starvation for three months. One day, a new boy came along. He wasn't used to hunger. His father had owned a small cook shop before he had died and left the boy an orphan. The boy's eyes grew wild with hunger. "If I don't get more food, I shall eat one of you."

This frightened all the other boys. Oliver was picked to get more food for this boy. He took his bowl and presented it at the stove. "Please, sir, I want some more." The cook was a fat, nasty man. He couldn't believe his ears. "What did you say?" "Please, sir," repeated Oliver, "I want some more."



The cook crashed the ladle down on Oliver's head and called for Mr. Bumble.

Bumble was horrified to learn that Oliver had asked for more food. It simply wasn't done. Bumble took Oliver before the council. "He shall be hung!" said one of the men. An animated discussion took place. Oliver was ordered into confinement and a note was hung on the gate outside the next day. It said: "Offering five pounds to anyone who will take Oliver Twist off the hands of the parish." Poor Oliver, he was about to be shuffled off once more.

