

The Impossible Boy — Bonus Chapter

The Impossible Boy opens with Vincent and Benjamin entering the orphanage. But what happened *before* then? Discover the first meeting between Vincent and Benjamin, the event which led to a string of strange and dark happenings . . . and don't worry, there are no spoilers!

1.

The scream of metal grows fainter and steel rods bend at impossible angles, poking in every direction like shattered bones. I look up and dodge snakes, no . . . wires hanging from the ceiling, hissing sparks. Five seconds ago this was a train. Now it doesn't look like anything except giant pieces of rubbish, torn and burnt.

Just five seconds?

I stare at the mess, feeling nothing. Why panic? This can't be real. And then, in the centre of my emptiness, I hear my own voice, screaming:

Run. Get out of here!

Yeah.

Don't think *—move*. Placing one foot down in front of the other, I stumble through the smoke and noise.

Where the heck am I?

Fifteen seconds ago, I . . . don't know. My memory's stained black; I can't remember. But even this darkness slips away, driven back by time; twenty seconds, thirty . . .

Just run.

My legs obey, moving faster, and so does the world. Shapes lunge at me from every angle, rushing past, and noise attacks my ears. But most of all there is The Knowing. Every fact, smell, colour and shadow burrows into my brain, offering up the truth . . . no.

I don't want to know.

Too much, too fast.

I keep staring ahead, waiting for the feelings to come, that *must* come. But my insides stay empty and clean.

Keep it that way; keep moving.

My eyes fix on a door, ripped off its hinges. Don't look at the bodies lying everywhere, tossed across the floor like broken toys. Focus on what is there, right in front of me.

A way out.

Voices cry out. Figures move through the smoke, racing down the stone subway steps. But I don't stop to call out, or question my ability to see through smoke and sense the shapes behind shattered carriage walls. I ignore it all, as if the world were a television screen and nothing to do with me.

I've nearly made it, and . . . wait, what's that?

Nothing special catches my eye. It's just a blur on the left side of my vision — a hand moving under a crushed seat. It pokes out from beneath a leather cushion, small fingers groping at thin air.

My hands curl into balls and my feet won't move around the seat. Everything inside me screams *keep running*. I've got to take care of myself. My eyes fix on the door and then a voice calls out, 'Vincent!'

No way.

My feet stop working, like his voice pulled on brakes. I stumble, catching myself against the railings. He's calling my name. *I am Vincent*. One minute ago, I didn't know. But now? I'm sure.

I take another step forward but my eyes pull me back, looking for the hand. It's coming from under that seat, I'm sure.

'Vincent — help!'

The wail goes right through me, cutting into my bones.

No.

I don't have time; I've gotta get out of here. But first I need to stop that voice tearing at me, calling my name. Reaching down I pull back the metal bars and cushions, and drag hard on the soft edges of a collar. Coughing and spluttering, a kid emerges from the wreckage, tears trailing through the dirt, carving rivers across his muddy cheeks.

The boy, barely six if he's lucky, looks up at me from under a mess of straw-coloured hair, streaked with grease. I take a second to examine his pointed jaw and dinner-plate eyes, staring back at me. Who is he?

The kid throws his arms around my shoulders, sobbing, 'Vin— Vincent . . . I want Dad.'

Wait, he knows me?

I've got an urge to put him down, but also to carry him away. Must be the shock, yeah, that's it, I'm in shock. I can't think of anything to say, so I just nod. 'Okay Benjamin.'

And the name comes to my lips without thinking, but so what? It's on the outside of his beanie, stitched in red cotton. But that doesn't explain . . . no, don't think. So many thoughts swell inside my head, a tidal wave of knowing, threatening to spill out through my eyes and ears. So I hold it in, pick up the kid and rush towards the torn off door, out onto the splintered platform.

My feet slap against the pavement, but there's no sound. Don't stop, keep going. Flashes chase after me, images inside my head. None of them make sense. I run harder, shaking the collage of pictures, fitting them into place.

Tearing past the twisted carriages, one by one, I run from visions of a war; rebel uprisings, fighting over access to water, the taste of rationed corn and bombs taped to the undercarriage of a train. Most of all I run from The Knowing. Too many facts spill through me as I race towards the empty turnstiles.

Benjamin bounces on my back, his feet wrapped around my waist. I can't feel a thing; it's like carrying a sack full of air. I don't stop until we reach the stairs. Light radiates from a hole in the ceiling and people come running, pouring out of the bright centre, their silhouettes glowing.

What's this?

Looking around I drop Benjamin on the ground, hard. I don't mean to; he seems to slip through my fingers.

'Ow,' he snivels, pulling himself off the ground.

'Sorry . . .'

The people run past, only glancing at Benjamin. Their bodies grow dim as they pass, turning ordinary and solid. How did they get through . . . oh, of course. It's not a hole, but the entrance to a subway. The world is somewhere out there, and daylight burns through the smoke, pouring in above us. Ordinary people run past, civilians mixed with medical volunteers, glowing thanks to a trick of light and dirty smoke.

You'll get used to the light. Give it time.

A strange thought. I prefer darkness? That seems right . . . was I living in the tunnels?

'Vince?'

Benjamin grabs a handful of his hair and pulls so hard I'm amazed it doesn't come out.

He says, 'I want Mum.'

Well, that makes two of us. I need to find his mum, get rid of this kid and start searching for a way back . . . where? The Knowing whispers words like *home*, but I've no idea where to find it. I only know it's somewhere in the dark, before the light came. So I say, 'Where's your mum?'

'I dunno.'

'What about your dad?'

'I dunno. He works in an office.' The boy scrunches up his face, concentrating. 'He . . . he wears a red hat.'

Great, that really narrows it down. I look back at the train. Oh man, his parents must've been on that train. Echoes thunder down the stairs, running feet peppered with the sound of voices. The footsteps get louder and more people rush past us, another crowd of grown-ups racing to help someone.

Good idea.

I move away from Benjamin, towards a man wearing frayed jeans and a grey t-shirt. 'Hey! This kid needs . . .'

He keeps running.

'Excuse me!'

Focused on the train, he sprints away, not even bothering to turn his head. Talk about rude, but okay. Here's another woman running past in shorts and slip-on sneakers. 'Excuse me!' I shout again. 'We need some help here, this kid . . .'

She dodges me, coming within a centimetre of touching, her eyes never meeting mine. Strange . . . The Knowing prods me, as if tapping my shoulder and about to explain, but I spin around, ready to catch the next one.

A man races past, his hair like threads of black silk. My hand grabs his arm, but I don't feel the pressure of flesh. My fingers touch the sharp edge of his elbow and then . . . slip right through.

The world stops.

So does the man.

He hovers in mid-stride, unbalanced. Eyes darting left and right, he looks straight at me, frowning. Someone yells at him, 'Come on!'

I can't think, I don't understand. I touch the man again, and my hand disappears from view, reappearing out the other side of his elbow. Isn't he real?

No. That's impossible.

He turns, shouting, ‘I thought I saw . . .’ He looks back at me, around me, above my head.

‘What?’

‘Nothing . . . I’m coming!’

He looked at me and saw *nothing*?

The guy turns and runs, joining the mass of people heading for the shattered train, ready to help, while I stand there, staring at my hand.

Wait, what’s that? My arms feel weird, weaker. Everything seems lighter. Shapes lose their edges, melting into thin air, dripping onto the tiled floor. Colours dissolve and . . . something is pulling me.

An invisible straw and it’s sucking up my bones, the subway entrance, the whole world . .

No.

I’m not going. I *won’t*. Got to find something to hold onto, an anchor . . . but all I see is Benjamin, his body lit up from behind by the light of the entrance. My hands fly out, grabbing his wrist. I’ve touched him before, he must be real — solid and round, my fingers curl over his palms.

‘Vince?’ His voice is uncertain, checking.

My vision pulls together; the room congeals like a freshly healed cut. My breath catches in my throat, almost choking me.

What the heck was that?

Not thinking, I thump my chest, checking to see if it’s still there. All my bones seem to be in the right places and for the first time I notice my clothes. I’m wearing a ridiculously long jacket, black and woollen. Wooden toggles poke through the fabric and my head sits under a huge hood. It’s a winter coat, pulled low over jeans, and the black colour matches my Converse sneakers.

Why am I wearing a winter jacket in the middle of summer? Hot breezes drift down the stairwell, curling around my face. These questions can wait. Others cannot.

Pulling back the hood I bend down, looking straight into Benjamin’s face. Whoa. His eyes blend green and brown, like the swirling centre of kid’s glass marble. I almost feel dizzy. Glancing away and yanking on the cords of my jacket, I take a deep breath. ‘Benjamin, who am I?’

‘You’re Vincent Gum.’

‘Okay, but — but what am I?’

‘You’re Vincent Gum.’”

‘Yeah, great, but um . . . how do you know me?’

He scratches his nose. ‘I dunno, just do . . . Vincent? Where’s Mum?’

Again, who is Mum?

And then, before I can say anything else, he mutters, ‘I need to go toilet, Vince. I need to go *now*.’

I don’t know this kid. I don’t know if it’s my responsibility to take care of him. But he knows me . . . and that’s more than I can say for myself.

Benjamin starts crying again and because I can’t abandon the only person who knows me in a bomb site, I pick him up. He snivels, soaking mucus into my jacket. I don’t mind. Truth is, I’m too empty to care about anything. I don’t even care that I’m alive, with no idea what I am or where to go. But his weight feels real and solid. And I can’t shake the feeling I’m holding onto the only person in the world with answers, the only one who can help me. And he’s so small.

Warm fingers wrap around my neck, light and helpless. Something rushes inside me, the first feeling — a burst of what? Something warm, filling up the emptiness. And I know I can’t let this boy go.

There’s only one thing to do.

‘Come on, Benjamin, it’ll be all right.’ Pushing the kid higher onto my back, I walk up the stairs. Nobody sees us; they’ve either rushed to help or run a mile away, and Ben mutters against my ear, ‘Will we be okay, Vincent?’

‘Yeah, we will.’

‘You won’t go anywhere?’

‘Nope.’

And I carry him into the light, out into the world.