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Opening extract from

Just Call My Name

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The most life-changing events happen on the most ordinary days.

It was normal that his mom wasn't home. She was the one who worked, so he didn't see her much during the week.

When Sam walked through the front door, his little brother, Riddle, was in the playpen staring off at nothing as he chewed a hole in the yellow mesh designed to keep him a prisoner.

The television was on. Not cartoons but a woman selling sweaters with glittering beads all over the shoulders. No wonder the kid had his face to the wall.

The toddler was probably hungry. But he didn't ever cry for food. He wasn't that kind of baby. He should have squawked about being stuck for hours in the corner of the living room, but he usually didn't. Ever since he was born, it'd been hard to figure him out. Isn't that why they called him Riddle?

Sam's father was supposed to be waiting at the fence when school was over. But Clarence Border never showed up. Sam knew how to get home, so it didn't matter.

He was seven years old and in the second grade. Sam had no way of knowing that he'd just gone to his last day of school and would never again see his mother. He could not have imagined that the next ten years would mean living on the road.

Sam put his backpack down by the door and walked over to the

playpen. Riddle didn't say anything but reached his hands straight up in the air just like the referees did on television when someone scored a touchdown.

Sam grabbed hold of his little brother's short arms and pulled him up and out of the square enclosure. Riddle was small for his age, and his wheat-coloured hair and pale skin made his grey-blue eyes even more piercing. Right now they shouted gratitude.

With Riddle following behind him, Sam passed by the kitchen. He could see the leaning tower of dirty dishes in the sink, which was business as usual. As he continued down the hallway to the bedrooms, he heard his father moving something.

Sam called out, 'I'm home.' No one answered.

Sam glanced into the bathroom. All of the drawers in the cabinet under the sink were open. Riddle liked to open things, so he peeled off to investigate.

In his parents' bedroom, Sam found his father stuffing clothing into two large duffel bags.

'Dad, are we going somewhere?' His father didn't even look up.

Sam watched as his mom's jewellery box was upended into one of the two travel bags. The costume necklaces and earrings tumbled out like treasure.

'Go to your room and bring me your shoes. And some of Riddle's stuff.'

A wave of happiness washed over the seven-year-old boy. 'Are we going to see Grandma? I wanna see Grandma!'

His father finally stopped moving long enough to acknowledge him. His eyes, Sam could see, had a jumpy look. They shifted around the room as if there were lots of people there.

Sam's happiness wave dried up.

And then, from the bathroom, came the sound of something crashing.

Riddle.

Sam got there before his father did. A blue glass dolphin that his

mother had kept since she was a little girl was in pieces on the tile floor.

Riddle loved that dolphin. He always wanted to hold it like a stuffed animal – only it wasn't soft or supposed to be held. The toddler had used the open drawers as stairs to climb high enough to reach the prize.

Sam heard his father behind him, shouting, 'You broke it! Are you happy now, Riddle?'

The toddler barely blinked, but Sam felt his eyes flood with tears. The shattered dolphin was Sam's fault. Riddle was his responsibility.

In one scoop his father lifted his little brother by the back of his shirt. He carried him straight outside and put him in the truck. Sam climbed in on the other side.

'I can't trust you to keep an eye on him. Now you both can just wait in here like dogs.'

His father slammed the door hard and returned to the house, but he wasn't there for long. The enraged man returned in minutes with the duffel bags and a cooler. He shoved everything in the back, next to sleeping bags and a plastic tarp. There was a toolbox, and two cardboard boxes filled with jump cables and his father's shotgun and hunting knife.

And then the motor turned over. The truck reversed, and the street disappeared from view, never to be seen again. His mother would come home hours later to an empty house that would stay that way.

Did they leave because Riddle dropped the smiling piece of blue glass? Is that what happened?

Sam Border did his best over the next ten years to forget everything about that day.

It worked.

Because now all the memories from the Day The Dolphin Broke were long gone.

This is now . . .

1

Here is who we are. Imposters.

Seventeen-year-old Sam Border walked down the leafy street of the Oregon town with his little brother right at his side. And he did not once look over his shoulder. He did not crane his neck to see if anyone was following him.

But he wanted to. Really bad.

Instead, he tried as hard as he could to appear casual, like he belonged, which of course he didn't.

His twelve-year-old brother, Riddle, walked as if he didn't have a care in the world. Which was probably the case. The kid lived in his head. Always had. Probably always would. It was what made him so different.

It was a warm June morning, and Sam realised he was sweating.

A lot.

He wanted to believe he was overheated, not flipping out.

He had to force himself to stop imagining the thousand ways his new life without Clarence Border could fall apart.

This was now a regular day. Get up. Walk over to see Emily Bell and her family.

It was that simple.

For ten years a typical day meant: Get up. Go search

dumpsters for food. Manage his father's anger. Take care of his little brother. Play his guitar until his fingertips bled. Be invisible. Watch the world go by.

But everything had changed.

Before he was numb.

Now he waited for the explosion.

Every morning until he got to Emily, he felt his stomach lurching.

For as long as he could remember, the only person who mattered in his life was Riddle. Sam had been consumed with keeping the kid safe.

Now he had a whole family to worry about.

The Bells already had two children of their own, so what could they possibly have been thinking by taking on the responsibility of him and his brother?

Their actions just didn't make sense without a motive. And so far, he couldn't uncover one.

Walking down the sidewalk, he felt that around every corner was the possibility of danger. Sam had no idea what form it would take, but this kind of happiness could never last. And that was the cause of his hidden panic.

Emily.

Focus on her.

She was his anchor.

E

MM

III

LLLL

YYYYY

Bell. Bell. Bell.

He repeated this to himself with each step.

Could something be an anchor if it wasn't weighing you down? Was it possible to be anchored to the sky?

Because that was how it felt to be with Emily: airborne. But with his feet on the ground.

She was beautiful and brilliant. She was funny and kind. She played soccer and spoke Spanish (sort of). She loved raisins and spicy mustard (not together). She laughed at the world, but most of all at herself. She loved life.

She loved *him*.

That was probably, right now, what mattered most.

His world had collided with a seventeen-year-old girl who cared. And just that simple fact had changed everything.

Sam walked faster, and a melody began to form unconsciously from the cadence of his footsteps on the concrete. The traffic whizzing by fell into a rhythm.

He found a pattern in the random motion and turned the sounds into musical notes that became a full score.

And as he did, he was able to vanish into an alternate universe where his mother had somehow survived. She hadn't been hit by a car only weeks after they'd disappeared, and he hadn't spent ten years held hostage by a crazy person.

Riddle looked at his big brother and knew Sam was thinking about Emily.

That's what Sam did all the time. He worked on his music, and he got gooey about his girlfriend.

Riddle had his own new love affair going now. With chicken. And the thought of it consumed him.

There were so many ways to cook a hen. Until recently, he never knew you could bake it or fry it or boil it or barbecue it. And it could be served at many different temperatures.

Debbie Bell let him in the kitchen whenever he wanted. His preferred routine had three parts. First he helped cook. Then he ate. And finally he drew the dish in a sketchbook that he kept with him at all times. The pictures took as much

time to do as some of the meals.

There was only one major stumbling block for him when it came to advancing in the world of food preparation.

Words.

He couldn't read. He knew about letters, of course. He'd learned their shapes and some of their sounds, mostly from road signs. But he had never gone to school, and he had trouble putting it all together.

That meant he was twelve years old and still on the outside looking in.

Emily Bell's toes were curling and uncurling in her flipflops, and she couldn't make them stop. Her digits had gone rogue.

She had to stand up to regain control of her own body. She still got *that* excited to see him.

And then . . . two figures appeared. Far in the distance, but Emily was certain of who they were.

Riddle was a kid. But he didn't have the distracted quality of a typical twelve-year-old boy. He seemed both older and younger at the same time.

Right now he appeared to be walking on his tiptoes. Maybe she was imagining that. But he was bouncy.

At his side was Sam.

She didn't have her glasses on. Or her contact lenses. But it didn't make a difference. She knew.

He was tall. Not muscle-bound, but strong. His thick hair, even when cut short, had a mind of its own.

But that wasn't how she was certain it was Sam. It was the way he moved.

He didn't stride forward with teenage-boy confidence. But he didn't cower either.

The fact was that his feet didn't touch the ground like other people's.

She realised now that something in the horror of their life with their crazy father had made Sam and his little brother walk without leaving footprints.

Riddle went inside the house, and Emily and Sam took a seat on the wicker sofa on the front porch, draping their bodies over each other like two blankets. The first thing they did every morning was take the time to get caught up.

'My dad made another appointment to see the adoption lawyer.'

Sam nodded as she continued.

'Apparently, the best option is for my parents to become your legal guardians. But to start the process to adopt Riddle.'

Sam could feel himself relax just being in her presence. He said, '"Legal guardian" sounds good. We don't want to be brother and sister.'

'No. Too weird.'

Sam knew the answer, but he still asked the question. 'And adopting Riddle is the right thing?'

They had gone over this many times, but she was patient. 'It protects him. Not just health insurance and the legal stuff, but in all the other ways. If you weren't about to be eighteen, my mom would be pushing for you to do it, too.'

Emily squeezed his arm and was surprised by how firm it felt. It wasn't only that he had muscles. He was tense. She could hear that in the tightness in his voice, but this was further proof.

The thought that he was on shaky ground made something inside Emily shift. She was no kind of hero. Her first response, even when she heard just a firecracker, was to run.

But when it came to Sam and Riddle Border, that changed.

She became fierce.

They weren't just deserving of love. They were different. They had been victims of abuse, and despite that, the two boys were more in touch with simple kindness than anyone she'd ever known.

Emily was going to be there for them. Always. Forever.

Sam looked over and saw something in her eyes and he knew that she was now worrying about him.

That was no good.

She believed in being positive. About everything. It was almost irritating. He tried now to say the right thing.

'I'll be eighteen on my birthday. Then I won't even need the guardian part.'

'No. You'll be a college student —'

Sam interrupted her. They'd been over this many times, but it still didn't compute.

'It's hard for me to see how I'm going from second grade to college.'

'You'll be in the music department. And obviously there are special circumstances. You tested really well – remember?'

Sam tried not to wince. The thought of that day of testing was still a nightmare.

He and Riddle had been taken by Emily's parents to see an educational specialist. Sam was anxious. Riddle had no anxiety about the whole experience. And then he was the one who came up short.

Sam's little brother could barely make out the words in the picture-book reader for first graders.

Was it Sam's fault Riddle couldn't read? Shouldn't Sam have at least taught his brother that? All those hours sitting in a truck? He'd failed the kid. Big-time.

Sam pushed aside the avalanche of guilt and said, 'I guess I just start by getting through summer school.'

Emily nodded. 'Exactly.'

Sam's eyes shifted and he found himself now staring intently across the street at nothing more than a hedge.

Emily wrapped her left leg around his right calf. He could feel himself relax as he said, 'I'm trying, Emily.'

'I know you are. And you're doing great.'

Sam's head sank deeper into the pillow. When he was with Emily, he was doing great.

It was when he *wasn't* with her that was the problem.

He mumbled, 'What's the thing you keep telling me?'

Emily scrunched up her nose. She looked so beautiful when she was really serious. He was still in the stage where every change of expression on her face seemed fascinating. Would that go away? He hoped not.

'Trust the unknown.'

'Right.'

Emily rolled over onto her side and looked right at him. 'You don't need to be afraid any more. About anything, Sam.'

Sam didn't even think. He just answered. 'I'm afraid of the future.'

'And why is that?'

Sam pulled her close. 'Before, I had nothing to lose.'

2

Clarence Border smiled at the woman.

She was reading his file, so she didn't see. He'd grin again when she looked up. But nothing too committed. He didn't want to seem desperate.

Because he was way past desperate, into some other territory of distress.

Can a man in a state prison, facing multiple charges ranging from kidnapping to fraud to larceny, be anything else?

The public defender put down the file and said, 'You took your two sons from their home ten years ago. That much you don't dispute – am I correct?'

It was then that she saw his toothy expression.

He realised immediately it was bad timing. He had only twenty minutes with the woman, and seduction was probably the wrong approach.

'Yes. But I'm innocent. You get that, right? I did nothing but be a good parent to those kids.'

The woman didn't blink.

'I think our best chance involves a plea bargain.'

He sat up straighter in his chair. He needed to get her to listen. To understand. To be on his side.

'But – I'm innocent.'

'Your sons have given extensive testimony that when they were no longer of use to you, you tried to kill them.'

'I didn't —'

'You aimed. You fired the weapon. There is evidence.'

Clarence could feel his whole body twist, from the top of his skull to the toes on both of his feet. Even the foot that was no longer there.

He exhaled. Slowly.

And then, 'They are liars. Both of them. That's the first thing you need to understand.'

The woman looked back at the file. And he knew she had made up her mind way before she got in the cinder-block room with the sticky plastic chairs and the smell of ammonia.

New angle. Not victim. Stronger than that. He continued: 'I'd like to talk to you about what really happened.'

He shut his eyes so that he could concentrate. And then he slowly began. 'I was the stay-at-home dad. And there was a fight with the wife. She wanted us to leave. All of us. She asked for that. She said she needed time away from the kids and me. I gave her a huge opportunity when I accepted the responsibility of raising the boys on my own. I was a single parent. That's not easy.'

Clarence opened his eyes and hoped he looked incredibly sincere as he said, 'Do you have any children?'

The woman spoke ice chips. 'I'm here to give you the best possible legal advice. Right now, if convicted, you face a lifetime in jail. You understand that – am I correct?'

Clarence tried to stay on track.

'We travelled. Me and the boys. We moved a lot because work is hard to find. There weren't problems until we got to Oregon. That's when my oldest boy met a girl. That's what

caused the trouble. Her family turned my boys against me. They are the ones who should be sitting here today – not me!'

Her answer said it all. '*You* are going to trial. Not the people who stepped in to help your sons.'

He got up from the table. *Help my sons?* Those people were the kidnappers. Not him.

They'd get their due.

That was all he knew for certain as he abruptly left the room.

Prison is a place where there is never, ever silence.

At all hours of the day and night, sound ricochets off the hard surfaces in an assault that literally makes people's eardrums bleed.

Mixed in with radios blaring and toilets flushing, carts are rolling and mattresses are slamming. Layered on top of that bed of constant clatter are raging arguments between groups of men, and between men and their souls.

Someone is always shouting.

And someone is always wailing. Half the time, the rant is directed at a blank wall.

What Clarence Border really needed was for the noise to stop. And it didn't.

The way he saw it, there was no public defender on the planet who was going to do the right thing, which meant that by the time the system was finished with him, he'd be eligible for parole when he was two hundred and thirteen years old.

His two no-good, backstabbing sons would probably be dead by then.

He hoped so.

Just thinking of Sam and Riddle made everything worse.

He'd seen the house that belonged to the Bell family. He could imagine the kind of kitchen they had and the food they ate.

And now, lying on his back and trying hard to make the pain go away in a foot that wasn't even there, he thought about the budget for three meals of inmate food: two dollars a day.

There were glass bits and sand, hair, and even parts of rodents in the slop that he was given to eat.

He'd be much happier if they just gave him a large box of saltine crackers and a glass of water. It wouldn't be cruel and unusual punishment. He loved those crackers.

Clarence could see Sam and Riddle sitting at a real table, eating off fancy plates and using silver utensils.

He scraped his spork across the moulded plastic plate that tasted like ammonia from the dishwashing dunk.

Both of his boys now probably had their own bathrooms with stacks of fresh towels waiting after they took long, steamy showers.

He had no privacy and only the constant smell of sewage and sweat mixed with the glare of the twenty-four-hour fluorescent lights overhead.

He was subjected to the contempt of the guards, the harassment of the other inmates, and the pain of his physical condition.

And all that made a noise that buzzed non-stop in his head. It was a chainsaw of fury directed at his own flesh and blood.

Well, he was going to settle the score.

Clarence held his hands out in front of his face and stared at his fingers.

He'd read in a magazine that researchers at the University of Alberta had determined that the shorter a man's index

finger when compared to his ring finger, the greater his tendency to exhibit aggressive behaviour.

And by *aggressive*, they meant violent.

It turned out (according to these eggheads) that the length of your fingers had to do with how much testosterone you were exposed to in the womb.

That's what fuelled all the Mr Short-Index-Fingers (short, at least, compared to their ring fingers) to become Mr Hotheads.

Clarence smiled. On both of his hands, his ring fingers were much longer than the digits right next to his thumbs.

It was strangely comforting to know that he was born who he was. Not every man could swing a shovel and hit someone squarely in the face. Just like most guys couldn't take a pair of pliers and rip off someone's ear.

Clarence didn't need to be provoked to do these things. He could unleash his rage machine at will.

His two boys didn't have that kind of power inside. They were, he knew for certain, made of other stuff.

Clarence shut his eyes and was able to picture Sam playing the guitar. Wasn't that all the kid had ever done, from the time he could first hold the instrument?

Riddle used his hands to draw. He usually didn't have paper or the right pens, but he still found a way. The kid was left-handed, which made sense to Clarence because the boy approached everything from the wrong side.

Clarence held his hand in front of his face and felt himself ignite. He bolted up from his thin mattress and screamed.

It was a full-on, mouth-open, high-pitched cry. The sound was a mix of anger, fear and pain.

When it was over, he sank back down and waited for someone to come check on him.

But no one did. Because not a person on this earth cared how he was doing.

And that was a feeling worse than being locked up.