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Opening extract from
By Any Other Name

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EGMONT

Our story began over a century ago, when seventeen-year-old Egmont Harald Petersen found a coin in the street. He was on his way to buy a flyswatter, a small hand-operated printing machine that he then set up in his tiny apartment.

The coin brought him such good luck that today Egmont has offices in over 30 countries around the world. And that lucky coin is still kept at the company's head offices in Denmark.

Holly

They told me to pick something unobtrusive, then they handed me a book of baby names and a cup of hot chocolate from a machine, and they left me there in the white room.

The cup was beige plastic. The chocolate tasted powdery. I stored these points away for later, as a memory of rebirth. The first moments of my new life: plastic and powder.

Strange that I should save that memory to take forward into the future, out of all the thoughts I could have had but didn't. All those feelings that should have been welling up inside me, bursting out . . . But I didn't feel anything. Numb from my skin to right down deep in my core. My senses concentrated and focused instead on just three things – a beige cup, the

cheap chocolate drink and a baby names book.

I picked up the book and thumbed through the pages. Names in alphabetical order, names with meanings, names I knew, names I'd never heard of. How to pick? Nothing that would stand out, nothing that would link me to the past – those were the instructions.

The past. As if everything that had gone before this moment was buried already.

Rebirth . . .

I read through the book until the words blurred and blended into one long muddle and every name sounded the same.

In the end, I chose Holly. Because it was December.

Chapter 1

The removal men manoeuvre the sofa through the front door and disappear inside the house. Dad's voice shouts directions to them. The late February wind gusts up the hill so I fold my arms to keep my jacket closed.

There's no fence around the garden. It feels exposed, as if anyone can walk right up to the windows and look in. The door is made of frosted glass, which is even worse. It'll be like living in a fish tank, on display to everyone, and I don't want to go inside.

The house itself is ugly. Apart from the too-big windows, there's a pointless wood-plank effect that starts halfway up the wall and continues to the roof. It's hideous. The upstairs windows stick out of the eaves like they were put in as an

afterthought. The drive is full of weeds where the tarmac is crumbling.

I survey the house next door from the pavement. It looks tidier than the one we're moving into, but the garden is gravelled over and dotted with stupid stone ornaments, including a giant mushroom with water fountaining out of a hole on the top. OK, riiight . . . a fountaining mushroom. Mum is so going to shudder when she sees that.

Dad's voice drifts out of the front door again as the removal men come out and go back in with a mattress. The open door beckons me to go inside and explore, but I don't want to. I don't want this scruffy house on a nowhere street in a dot-on-the map village to be home.

This isn't my home.

But neither is the place we lived before the fifth of December last year. Not now. Because there is no before. That's when I became Holly Latham, aged fifteen years and ten months.

Down at the bottom of the hill of identical, ugly, semi-detached houses, a bunch of figures in school uniform appears and walks up the hill towards me. I check my watch – quarter to four and school's out.

They get closer. The first group are about my age and I step on to the drive to let them pass, pretending to stare over the roofs of the houses to the hills on the other side of the

village. OK, so maybe now I do want to go in through that open door, to hide. I can feel their curious eyes on me.

I try to block them out. I can see most of the village from here. There's a cut-through to the high street and there's more shops than I expected. The church spire towers up over the black-and-white timbered cottages in the old streets, while the sprawl of the school lies on the outskirts, down the hill and in among fields dotted with sheep.

People *choose* to live here?

The country's all right for holidays, but what do they do here day after day? There's something missing, something that unsettles me, makes me jittery. It's the heartbeat of the place. The fast, excited, racing *lub-dub* of the city is subdued into a slow, dull, measured thud here.

I hate it already.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the first group has gone past, disappearing round the corner into a rabbit warren of cul-de-sacs. Some younger girls, maybe eleven, walk by and I take the chance to study their uniform because I'll be wearing it next week. Black trousers, white polo shirt, black sweatshirt with a small school badge. Unobtrusive. Just like I'll be.

They move on and the street goes quiet again. I breathe out and relax, letting out a *pfffft* of tension. The front door stares at me, challenging me – am I too chicken to go through it? It's waiting to swallow me up.

No, not yet. I'm not ready to be the person who lives here. Not quite yet.

There's a last, lone figure beginning to trail up the hill. He's not in uniform . . . oh no, wait . . . he is. No sweatshirt, that's what confused me. But his polo shirt has the school logo on it. His arms are bare despite the wind, but he's got headphones jammed in his ears and his hands are stuffed in the pockets of his school trousers. He slouches along as if he isn't aware that the skin on his arms is goosebumped and mottled purple with cold. Black hair flops over his face and his head is down, staring at the pavement, so I'm safe watching him. Metal glints in his ear and his eyebrow. Does this school allow piercings or did he put them in when he left? The black Converse All Stars he's wearing certainly wouldn't be allowed at my last school . . .

. . . But that's a code violation. An unauthorised memory access. Holly isn't allowed to think about the time before Holly came to be. That's how I choose to play it, how I make this craziness work and keep away the fear always present at the edge of my mind.

The boy glances sideways as he passes, walking in the middle of the road as though he can't be bothered to cross properly, and he catches me looking.

Dark, hostile eyes in a pale face glare at me. Eyes so hostile that I take a step back, even though I'm annoyed with myself

for doing it. Then his head ducks down again and he's gone round the corner.

'Freak,' I mutter after him.

But he's unnerved me enough to make me brave the house. To walk slowly up the drive, to take a deep breath, to step inside. I let it swallow me whole.