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Opening extract from

The Farm Beneath the Water

Written by

Helen Peters

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Chapter One



The Audition

"I'll walk from here," said Martha, as the ancient, mud-encrusted car turned from Elm Lane on to the main village road. "I don't want anyone associating me with this bunch of freaks. Dad, stop the car!"

"Don't be ridiculous," said Dad. "You can get out at the bus stop as usual."

Martha glared at him. She pulled a mirror from her school bag and began to make tiny adjustments to her carefully arranged hair.

Hunched in the back seat in a fog of misery, Hannah didn't see how she could possibly get out of the car. How could she walk into school looking like this?

All Lottie's beautiful work, ruined. Lottie would kill her.

And imagine what Miranda would say. She was horrible enough about Hannah's ordinary school clothes. Oh, she was going to love this so much.

"How's that pig, Joanne?" asked Dad. "Is he all right?"

Martha turned accusingly to her father, her face screwed up in disgust.

"As if it wasn't bad enough already, turning up at school in this heap of scrap, you go and add a pig to the mix."

Dad ignored her. Next to Hannah, eight-year-old Jo leaned over the tiny, trembling piglet lying in her lap. Her curly golden hair brushed against its pink skin. "Don't worry, little one," she murmured in its ear. "The vet will make you all better."

"And as for you," Martha said to Hannah, wincing as though Hannah's appearance caused her actual physical pain, "going to an audition dressed like a demented scarecrow. What were you *thinking*?"

"I'm supposed to be a walking advertisement," mumbled Hannah.

Martha snorted. "A walking embarrassment, more like."

Hannah said nothing. It was true. She *was* a walking embarrassment.

It had seemed like such a good plan at the time. Hannah was desperate to play the part of Juliet in her house production of *Romeo and Juliet* and her best friend, Lottie, was desperate to make the costumes. So Lottie had made a costume for Hannah to wear at her audition this morning.

"It will help you get into character," Lottie had said, "and Miss Summers will see I can sew and then maybe she'll trust me to make all the costumes. You'll be a kind of walking advertisement."

The long white medieval nightdress was beautiful. Until Hannah had brushed past a heap of old tractor tyres on her way to the car.

And there had been such a panic to get to school early for the auditions that she had completely forgotten to change into her shoes after helping Dad to unload the new calves.

So here she was, fifteen minutes late, curled up in a ball of despair in the back seat, wearing muddy green wellington boots and a white nightdress streaked with black tyre marks and tractor oil.

"Anyone would think," said Martha, "that you *enjoyed* shaming yourself in front of the whole school."

"It's not the whole school," muttered Hannah. "It's only Key Stage 3. And it's only Woolf House."

"Thank goodness for that. At least I won't have to watch."

Thank goodness for that, echoed Hannah silently. It was bad enough that Martha was at her school now, but at least she had been put in a different house.

"You realise you haven't got a hope, don't you?" said Martha. "I don't know why you're even bothering."

Dad pulled in at the bus stop outside the school gates. Hannah scrambled over seven-year-old Sam and tugged at the grimy door handle. The door stayed firmly shut. But the piglet wriggled out of Jo's arms and jumped into the front seat, right on to Martha's lap.

"Aarrgghh, get it off me!" screamed Martha, flailing her arms about. "Ugh, it's disgusting! Get it OFF!"

She yanked the passenger door open. And the terrified piglet leaped from the car and bolted through the school gates into the playground.

Hannah stared in disbelief. This couldn't be happening.

Martha froze, open-mouthed in horror. Then, like a sprinter off the blocks, she shot out of the car and pelted towards the school building. Her skirt was rolled up so high that it was almost invisible beneath her blazer.

"Where did it go?" demanded Dad, springing out of the car and scanning the playground, where groups of students were giggling, shrieking and leaping out of the way. As the pig scuttled into view across the tarmac, Dad raced after it, an extraordinary sight amongst the sea of navy uniforms in his torn trousers, holey jacket and mud-covered boots.

Using all her strength, Hannah finally shoved her door open and almost fell on to the pavement. Righting herself, she scurried towards the school, head down, boiling with embarrassment, while Jo and Sam hurtled through the laughing, screeching crowds in pursuit of the piglet.

Keeping her head down, praying that no one would see her and connect her with the pig, Hannah suddenly smacked full-on into somebody's chest.

"Whoa," said the somebody. "Steady on, Roberts."

Hannah's blood froze.

Jack Adamson. Of course. Somehow, he was always there for her most humiliating moments.

"Gotta hand it to you, Roberts, you sure know

how to make an entrance," said Jack, staring at the nightdress and wellies. "Is that what all the best pig farmers are wearing these days?"

"I've got to go," said Hannah, in a strangled voice.

"Aw, cheer up. Want a mint?"

He took a half-eaten pack of sweets from his pocket and held them out to her.

"No, thanks," said Hannah, avoiding the gaze of his soulful brown eyes. She dodged around him and ran towards the doors.

"You'll probably set a trend with that combo," he called. "By the end of the week, the whole school will be wearing it."

Hannah burst through the doors and raced towards the hall. And there was Lottie, immaculate as usual, not one dark hair out of place, hurrying up the corridor towards her.

Lottie gaped as she saw Hannah.

"My costume! What have you done?"

"I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

"I can't believe you've – " began Lottie, and then her eyes met Hannah's. The full awfulness of Hannah's morning must have shown in her face, because Lottie stopped in mid-sentence. When she spoke again, her tone was completely different.

"Oh, well, never mind. Come on, you might just make it."

"Has Miranda auditioned yet?"

"She's on now. That's why I came to look for you." She pulled Hannah down the corridor. "Why didn't you just change into your uniform?"

"No time. It's in my bag."

"And what's with the wellies?"

"Tell you later. It's been a nightmare morning."

They skidded to a halt in the foyer outside the hall and pushed the double doors open.

Miranda Hathaway, her long glossy auburn hair tumbling around her shoulders, stood centre-stage, pointing into the audience with a trembling finger. Hannah put a hand to her own straw-coloured hair. Had she even brushed it this morning?

Suddenly, Miranda let out a scream so piercing it made Hannah jump.

"O look, methinks I see my cousin's ghost
Seeking out Romeo that did spit his body
Upon a rapier's point – stay, Tybalt, stay!
Romeo! Romeo! Romeo! I drink to thee."

Miranda raised a small blue bottle to her lips and staggered across the stage, collapsing on a chair.

Scattered applause broke out from the other students in the hall. Standing at the back, Hannah clapped politely.

"Typical Miranda, totally over the top," muttered Lottie. "You'll be miles better."

Miranda stood up, flicked her hair over her shoulders and gave a little bow. Miss Summers, the new drama teacher, smiled at her.

"Thank you very much, Miranda. That was fantastic." She consulted a sheet of paper. "Right, that's everybody except Hannah." She looked at

the hall clock.

"Oh, I don't think she's coming," said Miranda. "I think she's changed her mind."

Lottie gasped. "The cow!"

"I'm here, Miss Summers," called Hannah, running to the front of the hall.

Everyone turned round. Miranda looked distinctly annoyed. Then she caught sight of Hannah and her eyes lit up as she took in the costume.

"Oh, good," said Miss Summers. "Just in time."

"*Love* the outfit, Hannah," murmured Miranda, as Hannah walked past her. "Where *did* you get those boots?"

Hannah forced herself to block out the snorts of laughter from the front row. She kicked her wellies off at the foot of the stage and ran up the steps.

Miss Summers looked slightly taken aback at the oil-streaked nightdress, but she gave her a warm smile.

"OK, Hannah, we've only got a couple of minutes before the bell, so just do the first speech, would you? The balcony scene."

Standing alone centre-stage, her eyes on the scruffy wooden floor, hearing the sniggers from the students in the auditorium, Hannah felt sick. Her palms were damp with sweat. All she wanted was to run away.

No, she told herself. You know the lines. You've practised and practised. This is your chance – your one chance – to show you're worthy of the part. You can do it.

She made herself look up. And her eyes lit on Miranda, right in the middle of the front row. She whispered something to Poppy, all black fringe and eyeliner, sitting next to her. Poppy cackled.

She's trying to put me off, thought Hannah. Well, I won't let her.

She shifted her gaze and gathered her thoughts. She wasn't Hannah Roberts, a twelve-year-old girl standing on the school stage. She was Juliet Capulet, a thirteen-year-old girl who had just fallen madly in love with Romeo Montague. And she was alone on her bedroom balcony, thinking aloud.

As she raised her head to begin, Hannah saw, through the French windows that ran along the side of the hall, some kind of scuffle taking place outside on the patio.

She pulled her attention away and focused on a point high on the far wall, imagining the starry night sky of Verona on a warm summer's evening. She thought of Romeo and, for some reason, he had Jack Adamson's face.

"Oh, Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?
Deny thy father and refuse thy name."

In the audience, she saw Jack's friend Jonah nudge his mate Ben and point towards the patio. Great. They were bored already.

With as much energy and passion as she could put into the words, she continued.

"Or if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,
And I'll no longer be a Capulet."

More people were looking out of the windows now. Nobody was paying any attention to her. Was she really that bad, or was it just that she was the last person to audition?

" 'Tis but thy name that is my enemy.
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague."

People were nudging each other, pointing outside and giggling. What was going on?

Focus, Hannah, focus, she told herself.

"What's Montague? It is not hand, nor foot, nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O be some other name."

What was that noise outside the hall doors? Running and shouting and … oh, no, please, no … yes, it was, it definitely was … *squealing*…

Oh, help, she thought. It can't be, can it? Surely not. Please, no.

"*What's in a name*?" she continued desperately, as if saying the words might make everything else disappear. Don't let them come in here, she prayed. Don't let them come in here.

Through the doorway at the back of the hall skittered the little pink piglet, followed by Jo and Sam. Heads shot round. People gasped and

shrieked. Miranda leaped on to a chair, screaming, her hands clasped to her chest, as if she thought the tiny creature was about to maul her to death.

Hannah continued to recite her speech, as though it were a charm that might protect her from the madness all around.

"That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet."

Jonah and Ben joined in the chase, along with Lexie and Amber from Hannah's class. Miss Summers cast frantic looks around the room, as though somebody might appear who could tell her how to handle the situation. Lottie stared at Hannah, her expression a mix of pity, admiration and horror.

Trapped in this nightmare, Hannah continued on her course. What else could she do? She was on stage to make her audition speech and she would make her audition speech.

"So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called,
Retain that dear perfection which he owes
Without that title."

Everyone seemed to be chasing the pig now. And the piglet weaved between them on its tiny trotters, changing direction, running between their legs, scooting out of their grasp when they lunged at it, evading them all as skilfully as a world-class

midfielder wrong-footing every defender on the pitch.

"Romeo, doff thy name,
And for thy name which is no part of thee,
Take all myself."

Up the steps and on to the stage skittered the piglet. Hannah dived and seized it with both hands. As she scooped it up, it lifted its tail and produced a stream of warm, pungent yellow urine that soaked into Hannah's white, oil-streaked dress and spread into a puddle on the stage all around her.

The hall erupted into hysterical laughter. Hannah stood frozen to the spot, unable to move or think.

Up the steps and on to the stage ran Jo and Sam. Jo made a grab for the pig, skidded on the wet patch and fell at Hannah's feet. Sam tripped over Jo and landed on top of her. The piglet bolted down the steps stage left and back into the mass of students. Jonah and Ben set off after it, knocking over chairs and crashing into Lexie and Amber, who were chasing it from the opposite direction. Poppy barricaded herself into a corner with two of the upturned chairs, screaming and clutching at her hair.

At that moment, Dad burst through the patio doors, his eyes searching wildly for the runaway pig.

Suddenly, an authoritative voice boomed across the hall, cutting through the chaos.

"What on *earth* is going on in here?"

Hannah looked up from the writhing bodies on

the floor, over the hysterical crowd beyond.

At the far end of the hall, standing in the doorway in a pristine grey suit, with a murderous look on his face, stood Mr Collins, the Head Teacher.