

Hillary Hall De Baun

Starring Arabelle

First Day

Deirdre Glendenning's flaming red hair matched the fire in her eyes.
"Unhand me, you beast! I am not yours to be so ill-treated, nor will I ever be!"
With the fury of one possessed, Deirdre lashed Squire Gunn across the face with her crop, flung herself onto his white mount, and galloped into the night...

Mrs. Archer poked her head out the front door. "Arabelle, why aren't you at the bus stop?"

Anxious and queasy, Arabelle hunched on the porch steps. "I want to finish the chapter, Mom. I'll flag the bus when it comes around the corner." She knew the book by heart she had read it so many times.

"Please don't miss your ride. Today of all days."

"Mom! Don't worry." Arabelle turned the page. The novel's heroine, destined to become a famous actress, was charging across the moor, leaving behind forever her cruel and despised master.

Her stomach churning, Arabelle read the same page twice. Surely reading about someone who barely escapes with her life would take her mind off her first day of high school, where as a ninth grader she'd have to prove herself—not just once or twice, but over and over.

A sudden grinding of gears drew her eye.

“Wait! Stop!” She clattered down the porch steps, waving madly at the yellow bus with **James Madison Regional High School** painted on its side.

The bus slowed to a stop. The doors folded open. “Why aren’t you at the bus stop?” the driver growled.

“Sorry.” Arabelle dredged up a smile and stumbled to an empty seat as the bus started up with a lurch.

The dough-faced boy next to her grabbed Deirdre out of her hands. “What’s this?” he wheezed, squinting at the dust jacket. “*Less Miserabulls?*”

“Give it here.” Arabelle lunged for the book, but he held Deirdre over his head.

“Bet it’s dirty.”

“It is not!” Leaping, she seized her book and stuffed it in her backpack before someone else grabbed it.

She had no wish to be seen in public with a romance novel like *Ravished!* With its steamy cover of Deirdre Alexis Glendenning, the legendary actress, bursting her bodice and some lovesick king or other kneeling at her feet, she’d be the butt of jokes. The dust jacket from her mother’s book club edition of *Les Misérables* had offered the perfect disguise. If anyone challenged her, Arabelle knew all about Jean Valjean being a convict and wanting to improve the world. Thank God for *Les Miz*, which she had seen on cable.

The twenty-minute bus ride took forever. Arabelle gazed out the window and imagined how her day would start. First, she'd make friends with her locker neighbors.

"Hi," she'd say. "My name's Arabelle but everyone calls me Alex."

"How come?" they'd ask.

And she'd say, "My middle name's Alexis but I prefer Alex." She would not mention Deirdre.

"Awesome name," they'd tell her.

And she'd say, "I plan to audition for the school play."

And they'd say, "Good decision, Alex. Go for it!"

For the rest of the ride, Arabelle indulged her favorite daydream, in which she stopped being an average teenager from a boring town that no one had ever heard of and morphed into an exciting *other* person destined for greatness. The story never changed. Orphaned from birth, bound over to a troupe of actors, she overcame every obstacle on her grueling climb to stardom. Deirdre had achieved fame overnight, which Arabelle thought grossly unfair. She could hardly hope for that, but starring in the school play would be the first giant step toward her goal. Her daydream always ended the same way: a final curtain call to a standing ovation.

Her bus, inching around the circular drive, was the last to unload in front of the sprawling, two-story brick and stucco building set down in what was once a cornfield between Albany, the state capital, and the small town of Grafton Green, where she had lived her entire life. Until this year she had walked to school.

Arabelle hesitated on the sidewalk, her smile permanently fixed as she strained for the sight of a friend from last year, someone to wave to, someone to walk and laugh up the steps with. A second later, she was pushed and elbowed through the arched front doors and deposited by the double-glass bulletin boards bearing locker assignments.

Arabelle finally located hers in the milling confusion of the hall. According to the alphabetical list, Jeff Anderson was on one side of her, Bonnie Atwood on the other. They wasted no time checking her out.

Arabelle darted a look at their lofty, knowing smiles. Upperclassmen for sure.

“You a ninth grader?” Jeff asked.

“Gosh, how’d you guess?”

“You look like a ninth grader,” he said, jamming books, hockey stick, helmet, and skates into his locker.

She had hoped she looked older. “My name’s Arabelle, but I prefer Alex.” Her cheeks ached from smiling.

“That’s pretty weird.”

“If you want to know why—“

“Spare me,” Jeff snorted, and kicked his locker door shut.

“Are you sure?”

“Yep.”

Arabelle thought fast. "You must be going out for hockey," she blurted, when nothing else occurred to her. She had counted on explaining her middle name.

Jeff waggled his eyes at her. "Ya think? Yo, Bonnie, how's it goin'?" Jeff Anderson was through with her.

Bonnie Atwood, tall, blond, and tanned, cracked, "Fantastic now that I'm breathing the same air as you."

Arabelle, squeezed between them, ceased to exist. She was invisible, a fate worse than death. Her five-foot-one body, small by anyone's measurement, didn't help, and neither did her wavy brown hair worn in a ponytail like a million other ninth graders. Why couldn't her eyes be green like Deirdre's instead of gray? Green eyes promised romance and adventure. In novels, the heroine always had green eyes.

"Hi, I'm Arabelle Archer but I prefer Alex." She smiled at Bonnie, determined to be visible.

Bonnie raised carefully plucked eyebrows. "Really? Well, I'm Bonnie Atwood but I prefer Bonnie."

Jeff rolled his eyes. "Save us from ninth graders."

"Ánd girls with boys' names," Bonnie said with a tinkly laugh that sounded fake, and off they went, leaving Arabelle to her very neat locker because so little was in it, and her failed attempts to stand out. She had faced her first challenge and come up short. Trying harder was the obvious solution.

At noon, after a morning of unreasonable expectations from her teachers, starting with English, then Algebra and Biology, Arabelle headed straight to the cafeteria. Erna Sue Comstock, the sole survivor of her inner circle, waited by the door. Three of Arabelle's closest friends had gone to Catholic school for ninth grade. She and Erna Sue had been friends since seventh grade, when they sat next to each other in Social Studies. Erna Sue had just moved to town from Milwaukee and needed a friend.

Unlike the middle school in Grafton Green, the James Madison cafeteria was half the size of a football field. Jocks and cheerleaders claimed the best seats. Everyone else settled for second-best at the long tables. The lunch line, two-deep, snaked out the door, then doubled back on itself. Loud voices and shrieks of laughter filled the air.

Arabelle and Erna Sue sat together at a table populated by ninth graders.

"What're you volunteering for, Alex?"

Arabelle gazed at Erna Sue, a taco halfway to her mouth. "What d'you mean?"

"For your college application. You don't get into a good college unless you volunteer for community service."

"I don't know. I haven't thought about it."

"My first choice is working at the village library, my second is monitoring the recycle bins at the IGA."

"What's the rush, Erna Sue? College isn't for ages."

“Alex, James Madison is a high-performing school. Four years is hardly enough time to do everything you need to get into a good college.”

Arabelle almost said, *Can't you ever let things happen? Why must you always plan?* But she didn't, because Erna Sue never let things just happen.

“I've been thinking about extracurriculars. I might go out for debating club.” Erna Sue stared at the hockey team shooting straw wrappers at the cheerleaders three tables over. “I need to sharpen my mental faculties so I don't end up like them.”

“Not much danger of that,” Arabelle said. Erna Sue was the smartest person she knew, not counting her own father who was a professor at the state university.

“What are you going out for?” Erna Sue asked.

“Drama Club.” Arabelle dropped her voice so no one would overhear. “I'm dying to be in the school play. What do you think my chances are?” Maybe Erna Sue would say, “Go for it, Alex!”

Erna Sue tucked her straight brown hair behind her ears. “Well, what plays have you been in?”

Arabelle slumped a little. “I was almost in *Annie*.”

“Wasn't that sixth grade? I was still living in Milwaukee.”

“Right, I forgot. Remember when I was in *The Sound of Music*?”

“You were Liesl—”

“No, I wasn't.” How could Erna Sue forget? Arabelle toyed with her fork. “I was a nun.”

“Of course, now I remember. You were—uh—good.”

She had been *much* better than good. “Just good or better than good?”

“Uh—better.”

Arabelle had hoped for more. Still, Erna Sue wasn't overly generous with compliments. When she gave one, she usually meant it.

“Isn't Drama Club mostly upperclassmen, Alex?”

“Is it? You mean I can't join?”

“Don't be silly. Joining is your constitutional right.”

“I'm willing to take the smallest role. One that nobody wants.” She'd start small and work her way to the top. Like Deirdre, stardom was her destiny.

“I wouldn't get my hopes up.” Erna Sue pushed her glasses up on her nose. They had a way of sliding down.

“Why not?”

“You're a ninth grader, remember? Rock bottom in the pecking order.”

“But what about my right as a citizen?”

“You have the right to join Drama Club, Alex. That does not guarantee you a part in the play.”

By the end of lunch, Arabelle had decided to sign up. The first meeting was scheduled for that afternoon, after the final bell.

Arabelle hesitated in the doorway of the activities room as students slipped past her and found seats. Bonnie Atwood stood up front.

“Well, hey, look who’s here,” she chirped. “Come on in. It’s Felix, isn’t it? This *is* exciting. You’re our first ninth grader. Isn’t this exciting, everyone? We’re dying to know why you’re here.”

“It—it’s Alex.” Arabelle swallowed hard. She had no speech prepared. Why hadn’t she written one in study hall? “I’d like a part in the school play,” she said, pasting on a glittering smile.

“So wouldn’t we all.” Bonnie traded grins with half the room.

“But I want one a lot. I plan on an acting career.” Arabelle’s face burned. Her words were all wrong. Deirdre Glendenning would’ve known just what to say.

“Freshmen don’t get parts, Alex. Who remembers the last time a ninth grader was in the school play?”

No hand was raised.

“You see?” Bonnie smiled at her.

“I’m willing to take a small part,” Arabelle stammered. “One or two lines are okay.” How could she fulfill her destiny and be a star if she didn’t have one or two lines?

Bonnie’s smile didn’t waver. “But we don’t know what the play is. Mr. Zee hasn’t decided—”

“Mr. Zee?” Arabelle racked her brain.

“The drama coach, Alex. And just so you know, I’m the president of Drama Club. At James Madison, seniors and juniors get dibs on all the parts. Freshmen wait.”

“I didn’t know—”

“Well, now you do.” Titters ran like brush fire around the room. “But feel free to join Drama Club, Alex.”

Arabelle had had enough. She had flunked her first audition. “Thanks, anyway.” Summoning her brightest smile, Deirdre Alexis Glendenning turned on her heel and fled the room.

The hall outside was empty. She fought back tears. I’ll show them, she vowed. One day I’ll be famous and then they’ll be sorry.

She resolved to try out for the play, no matter what.