

# THE ALIEN DIARIES

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For Cathy.

# 1

June 18, 1778  
New York

Sometimes I ask myself if that first unworldly experience in my 14-year-old existence opened my mind to the possibility of reoccurring instances of similar unbelievably could transpire again.

My name is Kate Arendell. I have two brothers named Robert and Anthony. Our father indentured us to Mrs. Dunn after her husband died because she was looking for help in her tavern called The Pig and Whistle.

My last memory of my mother is a pale, ghostly figure. She used to go over my reading primers with me before becoming ill. We started on hornbooks—a paddle-shaped piece of wood with printed words on each side and a handle on the bottom. The hornbook consisted of the alphabet in upper and lower cases, followed by vowels and phonics, with the Lord's prayer at the bottom. The reverse side had pictures beginning with Apple, Bull, and Cat.

After my mother became ill, she encouraged me to read Robinson Crusoe to her until she fell asleep. But one day, Father said Mother was too sick to care for us, so off to Mrs. Dunn we went. Father promised when Mother got better; he would come for us. It has been over two years, and we never saw Mother and Father again.

Mrs. Dunn is a tall, bony, sharp-tongued woman with high cheekbones and a protruding nose. She is not a woman who tries to keep up with the fashions of high society, preferring to channel her money, energy, and anger into running the tavern. She only wears two faded dresses, switching them on alternate days. I do not know if she

ever loved Mr. Dunn, but she returned to running the tavern after his funeral as if he had never existed.

After Mr. Dunn died, Mrs. Dunn hired an overseer named Isaac Wilson from England. He is not pleasant, but Mrs. Dunn took a shine to him. I have often caught Mrs. Dunn and Isaac engaged in many animated discussions. In contrast to the portly, dearly departed Mr. Dunn, Isaac is wiry and thin. A ponytail accentuates his sunken cheekbones. His tobacco-stained teeth and beady brown eyes give me every reason to shiver during our chance encounters throughout the inn. I heard rumors he committed a crime in England and was banished to the colonies. His job is to throw out drunken troublemakers and oversee the stables—a job he performs with an iron fist.

The Pig and Whistle is on Broadway, on the west side of New York. At the back of the tavern, you can see the masted ships dotting the Hudson River. A typical day for the three of us involved getting up at six in the morning, drinking hard cider, and eating Johnnycakes. Robert beheaded the chickens, plucked their feathers, and gave them to the cook. Anthony fed and raked the chicken coop and gathered the eggs. After tending to the chickens, the boys split and stacked firewood. Later, they cleaned out the fireplaces and brought in the firewood.

By 11 o'clock on most mornings, Robert would be tipsy from the cider and often tried to steal a nap. After working on the chicken coops, Anthony would drink his share of cider and sometimes fall asleep under a nearby tree. I let them sleep and warned them if Mrs. Dunn came around because she would lay into them with a switch if she caught them. Like Anthony and Robert, I drank apple cider but did so in smaller amounts as so to avoid being tipsy. My chores included feathering mattresses, switching sheets, and emptying chamber pots. It was impossible to please Mrs. Dunn. Everything I did had to pass her sharp eye and harsh criticism.

Mrs. Dunn took in boarders from many places such as Ireland, England, Germany, France, and Italy. The walls reverberated a hubbub of languages on topics around the war. The latest news had General Clinton moving his troops from Philadelphia to New York. Another rumor had France entering the conflict.

With so many people coming from various parts of the world, they often leave their belongings behind. I found books, magazines, and newspapers. Of particular interest were *The Gentleman's Magazine* and

*The Scots Magazine*. I devoured them every night by candlelight. I had to discard the others, for they were in languages I could not comprehend. I will study French and German one day, but Mrs. Dunn forbade us from reading and writing. Robert and Anthony cannot read or write. It is a constant worry for me as Robert is twelve and Anthony is ten.

We lived in the attic, which was often hot in the summer. I slept at one end of the attic while the boys stayed at the other. To ensure my privacy, I hung a blanket to divide the room. Robert has a small bookcase filled with small wooden carvings. Some are soldiers like the young, handsome British soldier we have on our second floor. Robert is working on a detailed carving of an owl from a block of wood.

Anthony found a bamboo flute on the street one day. He would play horrible music until Isaac took it away from him. I retrieved it from Mrs. Dunn's room while she and Isaac were on errands. How it got there tells me the story of Mrs. Dunn and Isaac's apparent liaisons, which I shall not comment on here.

On our rare days off, I took the boys for walks along the shores of the Hudson River. Anthony played his flute without interruption, and Robert wandered off to find inspiration for his carvings. Sometimes I sat on the rocks and read, or I would collect seashells to arrange on my windowsill in the attic. Over time, Anthony's flute playing graduated from a cacophony of notes to a sweet, meandering sound that is a joy to the ear. I am resolved to find a music sheet for him. I have tried to teach the boys to read and write, but they find it a chore, and with so much to do around the Inn, they are too weary of learning.

June 19, 1778  
New York

The elderly gentleman on the second floor died in his sleep. I did not know the poor soul's name. I got up this morning, and Mrs. Dunn asked me to check on the boarder and collect his rent. That was Isaac's job, but I did not dare to raise my objections to Mrs. Dunn.

I knocked on the gentleman's door, but there was no answer, leaving me no choice but to venture inside. I'd never seen a dead body before, and it looked as if the elderly gentleman was daydreaming, so I shook him to no avail. His eyes remained open, and I knew something was wrong. I shrieked, and Isaac came running up the stairs, followed by Mrs. Dunn. Isaac took charge of the situation and ordered me to

leave the room. I went to the kitchen to make a cup of tea to settle my rattled nerves.

Isaac sent for one of the stable hands to fetch the undertaker, who came and carted away the body. Mrs. Dunn swept into the kitchen and ordered me above stairs to clean the deceased's room because another boarder wished to rent the room this afternoon. Maybe the old man's ghost was lingering around and would be angry at me for being in the room where he died. Ms. Dunn told me to remove such foolish notions from my head and get above stairs at once. I entered the old man's room with trepidation.

After stripping the sheets and placing them in the hallway, I spotted a silver timepiece on the night table and listened to the steady ticking. I put the timepiece in my pocket and noticed a pair of worn shoes belonging to the gentleman. As I retrieved the shoes, I found a violin case under the bed with an exquisite four-stringed violin gleaming in its velvet confines. I noted a Latin inscription on the bottom of the violin, but I was unsure what it meant. *Antonius Stradivarius Cremonensis Faciebat Anno, 1728*. The gentleman must have been a trained violinist; since he was dead, no one would miss this fine instrument. I spirited the violin to our attic and hid it where Mrs. Dunn or Isaac would never find it. I concealed the timepiece among the many garments I had stuffed in my drawers. The violin would be a perfect gift for Anthony one day.

June 20, 1778  
New York

During the summer, sleeping in the attic did not always work to our advantage, and those nights were horrid because all the hot air ended up at the top of the house. Opening the windows did little to reduce our discomfort. We had to be up before Mrs. Dunn and Isaac, or we would face their wrath. We would stop by the kitchen for our cider and a piece of stale Johnnycake.

Robert got sick around noon. The heat must have gotten to him. Mrs. Dunn caught him napping under the tree. I was cleaning a room vacated by a sailor when Anthony ran to me crying. I saw Mrs. Dunn lashing into Robert with a whip from the second-floor window. Without further delay, I hurried downstairs.

Isaac tried to stop me, and I shoved him aside as I ran into the yard. Mrs. Dunn was slashing away at Robert, who was trying in vain to

avoid the blows. As I got closer, I saw the damage inflicted on my poor brother. To my horror, Mrs. Dunn was using a whip known as the cat-o'-nine-tails. Each strand of the whip ended with a metal hook instead of a tiny metal ball. Between deep breaths, Mrs. Dunn rained blows on a helpless Robert. His shirt was now a mess of torn clothing and gaping canyons of bloodied skin on his back.

I stepped in front of Mrs. Dunn and grabbed her wrist, but she was taller and stronger than me. A vicious backhand to my head sent me tumbling to the ground.

"Give me the whip," ordered Isaac.

Mrs. Dunn tossed the whip to Isaac, who delivered a powerful swipe that tore through my bodice before I could get to my feet. My shove must have humiliated Isaac when I came to Robert's defense. The sharp hooks sliced open my skin as an enraged Isaac pulled the whip away for another strike. The pain left me in a cloud of nausea.

"That will teach you not to interfere with our authority," cried Isaac between deep breaths of rage.

And through the fog of pain, I heard a voice.

"Stop."

"I shall not stop," came Isaac's angry response. "The children must be punished. This is not your affair. Unless you want food and drink, you best be on your way."

Despite the waves of pain, I tried to rise to my feet before sinking to my knees. I heard an odd humming sound and lifted my throbbing head to glance at the stranger where the sound originated. It emanated from a French Dragoon Cavalry flintlock pistol in the stranger's hand. I have never seen a pistol altered in such a manner that defied description. A small featureless box rested on where one pulls back the hammer before pulling the trigger. Copper wires ran from the box and coiled around the barrel before disappearing into the muzzle. Using the tree as a crutch, I stumbled toward Robert, but Mrs. Dunn intercepted me and pushed me to the side, where the pain from my stomach infliction coursed through my body.

"That's enough," said the voice.

Isaac spoke with a hint of fear. "What kind of weapon do you possess?"

"Something of concern for you if you do not drop the whip and step away."

I sensed a Finnish or a Scandinavian accent through the haze of pain. As my eyes blurred, I saw a strange woman make her way to



Robert. She dropped to her knees and cradled his bleeding head in her arms.

"We appear to have a dilemma," the male voice said. "You have inflicted egregious harm on the children."

"These children are indentured to me," came Mrs. Dunn's spiteful response. "I shall do as I please."

"A jury of your peers may say otherwise," said the voice. "My child, are you well?"

Was the speaker addressing me? I could not tell. I willed away the fog of pain and laid my eyes on the regal speaker, who stood over six feet tall. Years of exposure to the sun had weathered his skin. Behind the raised, odd-looking pistol, his hardened face failed to betray the concern emanating from his blue eyes.

"I'm speaking to you, child," said the stranger. "What is your name?"

"My name is Kate Arendell," I uttered before blackness engulfed me.