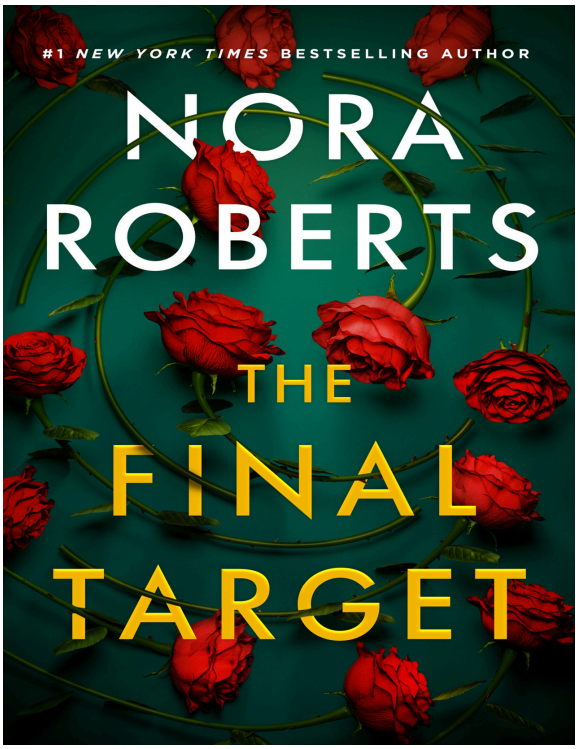



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PART ONE

# Shattered

**Like one, that on a lonesome road**
**Doth walk in fear and dread,**
**And having once turned round walks on,**
**And turns no more his head;**
**Because he knows, a frightful fiend**
**Doth close behind him tread.**

**—SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE**



# Chapter One

The back room of Next Chapter bookstore tended toward organized chaos. The small space held a counter, a couple of stools, shelves crammed with books. Boxes of books yet unopened were stacked along one of the short walls.

Arden knew where everything was, down to the extra pens, the rolls of tape, the box cutters, the printer paper, the Sam's Club M&M's. And all the rest.

She'd worked part-time in the bookstore since she'd moved from the Columbus suburbs to the Short North with her college degree hot in her hand.

Considering her major in English lit, most expected her to go into teaching.

Instead, she'd written a book.

It had taken her more than a year, juggling her college, then her work schedule and what barely passed as a social life, but she'd done it. It took months more to find an agent who'd take her and *Whispers* on. More months before the agent performed the miracle of selling the manuscript.

Now, two years and nine months after she'd sat at the keyboard and faced the first blank screen, she'd accomplished what she'd set out to do.

She held on, gratefully, to the fact no one could ever take that away from her. Whether or not she sold a single copy, whether or not everyone who bought or borrowed it thought it stank, she'd sold and published a book.

The proof stood in stacks on the counter of the back room of Next Chapter.

Where in about five minutes, she'd face her first event.

She knew how signings and readings worked. As a bookseller, she'd helped run plenty of them. But now instead of managing the line or ringing

up sales, she'd be the one sitting at the table, signing a book with her name on the cover.

*Whispers* by Arden Bowie.

Because it made her giddy, Arden picked up a book from the stack just to look at it again.

Her name on the cover, her words inside.

She had friends and family coming, so she would sign at least a handful. Amazing, she thought, and after giving the cover a stroke, set it back down again.

In a few minutes, she'd be the one smiling and chatting and pretending she knew what the hell she was doing.

She felt a little bit sick.

She'd handle it. Maybe she'd been born an introvert, but she'd taught herself to be outgoing, she reminded herself. A good thing, as she'd been taller than most of the boys her age, and gawky with it.

Tall, gawky, with hair just red enough to make her feel awkward? A natural outcast if she hadn't pushed herself.

Then when her parents hadn't come home from their date night, when they'd been two of the fatalities when a sixteen-wheeler had skidded on icy roads, she'd been the orphan. The fourteen-year-old orphan who'd had to move from Brooklyn to Columbus, Ohio, and the home of an aunt and uncle and two cousins she barely knew.

She'd been the angry, grief-soaked kid without a choice.

She hadn't made it easy for them, but gave herself a break there. They certainly had given her one.

They were out there now. Her aunt Jen, uncle Doug, her cousins Zoey—and her fiancé, Boone—and Travis and his wife of eight months, April.

They'd given her back what that terrible night in February had taken away, and she'd never forget it.

She opened one of the books stacked on the counter to the dedication page.

**To family, lost and found.**

She thought of her parents, hoped they'd be proud she'd done what she'd wanted and needed to do.

Then closed the book.

Terri, the manager and five-foot-two powerhouse, stepped in.

"About ready?"

"Yeah, sure."

Had to be, wanted to be, would be.

"We've a nice crowd."

Arden had stuck to the back room because she hadn't wanted to see. "Really?"

"Eighty-six by my count."

"Really?" Arden repeated. She'd have done a tap dance for half that number. "That's a solid number for a Tuesday night, and a weight off. I know what it takes to put one of these on, and I'm so grateful."

"You know we enjoyed every minute. It's the first time we've done an author event for one of our own. And I told you I loved the book."

"You have to say that."

"I don't have to mean it, but I do." Terri reached up, patted her hands on Arden's cheeks. "And you look great."

"Thanks."

She'd bought the short, simple dark green dress because she'd wanted new for this first time. And thought it looked professional but not stuffy paired with tights and boots—also new. Flat-heeled, as at five-eleven she didn't need the height.

"Hair okay?" She patted at the hair, freshly bobbed at her jawline.

"It's perfect. Lana's warming them up. I'm going to introduce you, then it's off and running. You're going to have fun."

If she didn't babble, or freeze or choke.

But Arden stepped out, plastered the welcoming smile—she'd practiced—on her face.

The little-bit-sick ebbed when she saw people in the event area. And went away altogether when she found her family.

Terri stepped up. "Welcome, everyone. Some of you already know Arden Bowie, as she's part of the team here at Next Chapter. And we're excited to

have her here tonight signing her debut novel, *Whispers*. Trust me, reading it's going to keep you up late tonight. Arden's going to give you a little preview of why you'll need an extra shot of coffee in the morning. Let's give a Next Chapter welcome to our own Arden Bowie."

They applauded. Really, Arden thought, what choice did they have? But she appreciated it, even the hoots her cousin Travis let fly.

"Thank you, Terri, and thanks to my teammates at Next Chapter, the best independent bookstore in Ohio."

She heard her voice carry through the room, relieved that it sounded strong and clear.

"And thanks to all of you for coming out on this cold Tuesday night, giving some time to a new author and her first book. I'll add I hope Terri's right and *Whispers* costs you some sleep. It seems only fair, since it cost me plenty of sleep to write it."

She took a breath, scanned the room, made eye contact here and there as she picked up the book on her table.

"*Whispers* is a story about a woman leading a quiet, even ordinary life who finds that life turned inside out. To survive, she'll have to peel away the ordinary and reveal who and what she really is. This is the beginning.

"'She shouldn't have been there,'" Arden read, "'at that time, in that place. If she hadn't stayed behind, worked so late, if she hadn't given in and laid her head down on her desk, she'd have been home. Home in the quiet and the safe.

"'But by the time she woke, annoyed with herself, gathered her things, switched off the light, it was already too late. The voices came, hardly more than whispers in the quiet that would never be safe again.

"'And she heard.'"

As she read the opening chapter, Arden saw it as she had when she'd put the words on-screen. For that space of time, it became her reality, replacing the bookstore with its colorful stacks, the rows of chairs she'd helped arrange only hours before.

For those few minutes, she let herself live it, so when she reached the end, closed the book, the applause jolted her back.

Her quick laugh was breathless and genuine. "Thank you."

“And thank you, Arden, for putting us all on the edge of our seats.” Beaming, Terri stepped up again. “And since we are, Cassie and Drake will help you form a line to have your book signed.”

Her family got there first, and Douglas Rogan laid down a stack of seven books.

“Uncle Doug, really?”

“All called for, right, Jen?”

“Absolutely. You were wonderful, honey. We’re so damn proud. Now, there’s one for each of us, one for Doug’s dad, one for your grandmother.”

As Jen rattled off the names, Arden just grinned at them. She’d heard her uncle called a handsome son of a bitch. He really was handsome, with his wavy brown hair, bold blue eyes, and wide rubber grin. And with Jen—tall, lean, chestnut hair—they made a handsome couple.

Another stack for Travis and his new bride, and double that for Zoey and Boone.

“I’ve got a big family, and I get to brag my sister-in-law is a big-deal writer.”

“‘Big deal’ is yet to be determined.”

“You are to us.” Zoey reached out to grip Arden’s hand. “The biggest.”

For months after Arden moved in, she and Zoey had butted heads, and hard. Then, though neither could say just when, how, or why, they’d bonded like glue.

“Drinks at Barney’s after you’re done. Mom and Dad already have it set up, so no argument or excuse.”

“None.”

“Now get to work.”

She smiled at the first unknown face, and got to work.

She lost track of time in the wonderful weirdness of signing her book, handing it back to people she didn’t know.

Some she did—regular customers, friends, even a smattering of people from her high school years.

She talked, laughed, signed, and felt very much as if she stood to one side watching it all in amazed amusement.

When the last in line stepped up, her smile came as easily as it had with the first.

“Hi. Thanks for waiting.”

“Oh, no problem. I really liked your reading.”

“I hope you enjoy the rest of the book.”

“I read a little more online. Totally hooked. I just moved here a few weeks ago, and this is my first book signing.”

She knew the value of making a connection, so warmed up her smile a little more. “You’ll love living in Short North. It’s a great neighborhood. Who can I sign this to?”

“For Dustin. For me. You probably hear this a lot, but I’m trying to write a book, too.”

“That’s great.”

He beamed at her, a man with a solid build, dark blond hair pulled back in a short tail. He had a pleasant-enough face with deep-set brown eyes that lingered on hers.

“Any advice?”

“I’m barely off the ground here, but if I have any, it’s don’t give up. If it’s something you want, something you love, you don’t quit. Quitters don’t win, even if it’s just doing something you love for yourself. That’s a win.”

“That’s really good advice. Thanks.”

She offered him the book. “I hope you enjoy the rest of the book.”

“Oh, I know I will. You know, you have hair the color Titian painted.”

She’d heard that a time or two, and just kept smiling. “Red hair’s a Bowie trademark.”

“And amazing eyes. Like bluebells. My grandma, she loved bluebells. It makes me feel like I kind of know you.”

“Dustin.” Terri slipped smoothly forward. “Cassie will ring you up. I hope you’ll come back. Did I hear you say you’ve just moved to Short North?”

“Yeah, just a few weeks ago.” He glanced back at Arden over his shoulder as Terri guided him away.

And when they shut the door with the CLOSED sign out, the staff cheered.

Cassie held up a hand. “And let me announce, with that last sale? One hundred and sixteen copies of *Whispers* have walked out the door.”

“A hundred and sixteen?” Arden danced in place. “Holy crap! Well, my family bought half of those, but still.”

“They did not buy half.” On a laugh, Cassie threw her arms around Arden. “Congratulations.”

“You’ve all made this the best night of my life.”

“It’s just starting,” Terri reminded her. “You’ve got the Friends of the Library talk, the signing at More Books in Clintonville.”

“I wouldn’t have any of those if you hadn’t twisted arms.”

“I didn’t have to twist, just tap shoulders. Go, your family’s waiting for you.”

“I’ll help break this down first.”

“You will not. Drake, you walk over with her. That last one might be lingering out there. He was hitting on you, Arden.”

“Oh, he’s trying to write so he wanted to talk. He wasn’t any trouble.”

“Maybe not, and maybe I’m old enough to have two grandkids—God knows how that happened—but I still know when a man’s got the hit-on in his eyes.”

“How about this? I help break down. It won’t take long. Then everybody walks over and has a drink. Best night of my life,” Arden reminded them.

“I vote yes, Grandma.” Cassie grinned at Terri.

“All right, all right. Then let’s get it done.”

★ ★ ★

He had lingered, and hadn’t felt the cold. When, from the shadows, he saw the whole group walk out together, saw the others form what seemed like a wall around Arden, he felt that cold.

And with it a bitter disappointment.

★ ★ ★

When Arden woke in the morning, she decided she’d make this the second-best day of her life. Since she tended to wake early, she rolled out of bed in

the dark, hit the lights, then made her way into her kitchen.

She'd chosen the small-scale two-bedroom apartment for its location. Just over a block from her part-time job. And the two bedrooms gave her a dedicated office.

The kitchen, tiny compared to the space in her parents' home, in her aunt's, suited her. Its galley style meant everything was close at hand when she had the urge to cook.

In her flannel pants and T-shirt she made herself her version of a latte, which she'd been told—often—was coffee-flavored frothed milk.

But that suited her, too.

Wednesday mornings meant the gym. Weight training—because otherwise her arms went to toothpicks and her legs to spaghetti. Her yoga class, then home before ten. A shower, a midmorning smoothie.

And all day, all second-best day, to write.

Gulping her latte, she went back to the bedroom to make her bed. Then nodded in satisfaction. The bedroom reflected her—the calm blues and greens, soft fabrics, pretty pillows, the fluffy hand-knit throw she'd found in a local shop.

In the bathroom, where the size alone required everything be organized and stowed, she pulled her hair back into a stub of a tail. And thought, again, she missed the nearly fourteen inches of hair she'd had cut off because she thought the shorter style was more sophisticated.

It *was* more sophisticated, she reminded herself. It was just that the rest of her really wasn't. Plus, it seemed to her the style made her chin look more pointed than it already was.

"It'll grow back," she muttered. "Eventually."

She brushed her teeth, went through her morning skin-care ritual, even though since it was a gym day, she'd repeat that routine after her shower.

She could still hear her mother's voice.

*You have such beautiful skin, Arden. It's like porcelain. You need to take care of it.*

She hadn't paid much, if any, attention at the time—what young teen did? But in the years following her parents' death, in a kind of homage, she'd become religious about it.