

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 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—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.”

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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 best day, to write.

Gulping 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.

After changing into black yoga capris and a tank, she pulled sweats over them. The app on her phone told her the weather would be cold and clear, so she'd walk the four blocks.

Bundled into her coat, knit cap, and scarf, she headed out the door, jogged down the two flights.

Dawn had broken, and the app hadn't lied. The cold hit her face and did more than the latte to wake her fully.

She walked the block to High Street with its metal arches. Traffic, still light at this hour, cruised along. She passed shops and restaurants, still closed. In the next block, she spotted a local walking his corgi.

"Hi, Mr. Grassley. Hi there, Jimbo." Crouching, she gave the wagging dog a rub.

Grassley, short and stocky like his dog, pushed up his glasses. "Gym day?"

"That's right."

"Don't work out too much or there won't be anything left of you."

"I work out to put it on, not take it off."

"Well, you looked real nice last night."

"Thanks. I appreciate you and Ms. Grassley coming."

"The wife started on your book when we got home. Said it's good so far. She'll pass it over to me when she's done." He gave Arden a wink. "I'll let you know what I think."

Arden lifted both hands, fingers crossed. "See you later."

Buoyed by the *good so far* she quickened her pace to the fitness center.

She spent thirty minutes between the machines and free weights, and pleased herself by working up a sweat. And from there to yoga, where she felt buoyed again by a couple of members congratulating her on the signing.

As she walked home she wondered if it would ever get old. And hoped it wouldn't.

Along the walk, her phone signaled a call. When she saw UNKNOWN NUMBER on the display, she ignored it.

By ten-thirty, she sat at her desk and did what she'd resisted the night before due to the time she'd gotten home. She texted her agent.

Signing successful! 116 books sold! Thank you again for helping me get here.

On a long sigh, she booted up her computer. She opened the fat manilla folder where she kept her notes and research. For a moment, she closed her eyes to help her put herself back into the story and the people in it.

The bass intro to Queen's "Another One Bites the Dust" rocked out of her phone.

Jolted out, she glanced at the display and this time saw her agent.

"Yvonne, hi!"

“Congratulations, Arden. Your first signing, and a really strong showing.”

“I had a lot of friends and family there, and it sure didn’t hurt.”

“You take your bows,” Yvonne said, with warmth in her clipped native New Yorker voice. “You did the work, and you wrote a good book. Now I’m going to say you wrote two good books. Your publisher made an offer on *Rebound*.”

“You’re kidding. You’re not kidding?” She already pushed up from the desk. “Holy shit.” She’d written it during the months and months of hunting for an agent, of hoping for a sale. Then had kind of torn it open and reworked it.

“Do you have time to talk about the offer?”

“Oh, I think I can definitely make time for that. Just hang on one second.”

After muting the phone, Arden threw back her head, let out a war cry.

Then she breathed in and out before sitting at her desk again. Unmuted the phone.

“I’m back.”

After the call, she sat. She’d expected to bask. Instead, she felt the jitter of nerves and an urge to weep. Once she’d given in to both, she went to the kitchen to drink a glass of water, to settle herself again.

She took an orange out of her little fruit bowl, peeled it more for the smell than the taste. The scent brought her father there, right there.

Basking would wait—she’d give herself that later. All of that was down the road, and the road could and did take sharp turns.

“I did it twice,” she murmured. “And that matters. What matters more, right now, is doing it again.”

She went back to her office, sat, put everything out of her mind but the story and the people in it.

And got to work.

* * *

The next day, she put in six hours at the bookstore and had the strange delight of ringing up her own book for customers, twice.

She put in another four hours at Next Chapter on Friday—three sales!—then rushed home to change for her second-ever book signing.

When she stepped out of the back room, she had the surprise of seeing Zoey and two of her cousin’s bridal attendants in the front row.

And a second surprise when, as she began to speak, scanned, she saw the man who’d been the last in her line at Next Chapter.

As she spoke, part of her brain searched for his name, but couldn’t quite find it. After her reading, she sat, picked up her pen. Then rolled her eyes at Zoey.

“Are you stalking me?”

“I certainly am.” Zoey tossed her wavy brown hair, wiggled brows over golden-brown eyes. “A twice-published author gives me the hots.”

“You already bought the book—and that’s after I gave you one of my author’s copies.”

“I did, and I’m buying this one for my new boss.”

The new boss brought it home, again, that in just under two months, Zoey and Boone, the newlyweds, would relocate to Oregon for career opportunities for both too good to dismiss.

“It’s for Carmen.” Because they both knew the move would be hard, Zoey laid a hand over Arden’s and squeezed.

“She’d better appreciate you. Valley Vineyards better appreciate you. Oregon better appreciate you.”

“I’m going to make sure of it.”

If anyone could, Arden thought.

“We’re so excited for you, Arden.” Cecily, Zoey’s friend since high school, passed over her book. “After this, margaritas at Rancho.”

Even as Arden opened her mouth, Allison, the second attendant, held up a hand. “Single. One drink. You’re driving, so one and nachos and wedding talk to soak that up. We’ll save the multiples for the bachelorette party.”

“I can agree to that.”

“We’re going to browse around first. It’s a cute shop. And we’ll meet you there when you’re done. You’re doing good,” Zoey added.

When she reached the end of the line, she still hadn’t jogged the last reader’s name loose. But she smiled up at him.

“Hi. It’s nice to see you again.”

“You did great. You look great, too. That blue dress really brings out your eyes.”

Hitting on her? Yeah, maybe. But she knew how to block a hit.

“Thank you.”

“I read your book. I thought it was terrific, start to finish. And what a finish!”

“I’m so glad you enjoyed it.”

“Loved it. I literally couldn’t put it down. The way you described things? It’s like I was right there, living it. Plus, all the details about bioweapons, the FBI. I mean, wow. You must’ve done so much research.”

“Thank you, that’s so nice to hear. You’re buying another copy?”

“Oh, yeah.” He gave her a big, wide smile. “For Dustin.”

It shook loose—Dustin—so her polite smile went puzzled.

“Um. My grandfather. I was named for him. Even signing all these books for people, you remembered my name. Anyway, I know he’ll love it as much as I did.”

“I hope so.” She began to sign.

“I’d really like to talk to you about your book, your process. How you research.”

Those deep-set eyes stayed latched on hers so she felt her spine start to itch.

“Oh, I imagine everyone has their own process, don’t you? I’m so new at this, and hardly an expert. And I’m—”

“I’m really interested in yours. Your advice the other night really hit home for me. Don’t quit until you get what you want. Don’t let anything or anyone stop you. That’s exactly how I feel, so we’ve got a similar mindset.”

Had she said that? She didn’t think she’d said exactly that.

“I hope you’ll keep writing. You have to love it to stick with it.”

“Exactly. When it’s meant to be, you know it. We need to talk more. Could I buy you a drink, or a late dinner?”

“Thanks, but I’m meeting some friends when I’m done here.” She handed him the book. “It’s really sweet of you to buy the book for your grandfather. I hope he enjoys it.”

“No question about it. Listen, I’d love to get together sometime. It’d be awesome to talk to somebody who’s done what I’m trying to do.”

She wanted to get up, stretch her legs, relax her smile muscles. But she kept her smile in place as she put her pen away.

“I know what you mean, but I’m really busy right now. With all this, the writing, and my cousin’s getting married in a couple weeks. I’m maid of honor and in charge of her bachelorette party.”

She rose now, hoping it would signal the bookstore manager. “You might consider joining a critique group.”

“I’m not about groups, you know? All those opinions and agendas. I’m better one-on-one.”

“A critique partner then.”

His eyes seemed to sparkle. “You’d do that?”

“Oh, no, sorry, I really can’t. You should talk to the manager.” A little desperate now, Arden lifted a hand, waved her over. “I bet she can give you some names or suggestions. Thanks so much for coming.”

She slipped into the back room, took a breath. Maybe not hitting on her so much as a woman, she decided, but as a published writer.

She needed to get better at giving good, broad-based advice, she thought. Obviously, she’d made hers too personal, given him the wrong idea.

And he’d gotten a little spooky.

After she said her goodbyes, she went out to her car to drive the handful of blocks to Rancho.

She didn't notice the car following her, or pulling in a few parking spaces away. And when she came out an hour later, laughing with her friends, hugging goodbye, she didn't notice the car that followed her home.