

# GET IT?



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A  
SECOND  
CHANCE  
ROMANCE

USA Today Bestselling Author  
**J.M. DARHOWER**

GHOSTED

J.M. DARHOWER



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*This book is dedicated to everyone who has ever loved a story so much they could quote it.*

*There's nothing in the world quite like being part of a fandom. Never let anyone shame you for it. Read those books. Watch those movies. Binge those TV shows. Love those characters. Admire those celebrities. Write that fan-fiction. Draw that fan art. Go to those conventions. Sing that (on-hiatus, totally-not-broken-up) boy band at the top of your lungs. Do what makes you happy.*

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# PROLOGUE

ONE YEAR AGO

*Drip. Drip. Drip.*

Rain fell from the overcast sky in sporadic bursts, quick manic showers followed by moments of nothingness. The weatherman on channel six had predicted a calm day, but the woman knew better. A tumultuous storm was rolling in. There was no way to avoid it.

*Thump. Thump. Thump.*

Her heart beat frantically, blood surging through her veins, mixing with enough adrenaline to make her stomach churn. She might've been worried about getting sick if there had been anything left inside of her to give, but no... she was empty. Burying her mother had taken everything out of her. This, on top of that, was too much for her to bear.

*Boom. Boom. Boom.*

Kennedy Garfield stood on the front porch of the two-story white house, staring out into the yard as thunder clapped in the distance. Lightning illuminated the darkened afternoon sky, giving her a better view of *him*. Her uninvited visitor stood a mere ten feet away, dressed in a designer suit that cost more than she made in a year, but yet he still somehow managed to look thrown away. His black tie hung loosely around his neck, his button down soaked and clinging to his ashen skin.

“Why are you here?” she asked, unable to handle his silence or his presence. As quickly as this storm rolled in, she needed it to go back away.

“You know why I’m here,” he said quietly, his voice shaking. Even from a distance, she could tell he’d been drinking, his eyes bloodshot and glassy.

“You shouldn’t be here,” she said. “Not now. Not like this.”



He said nothing for a long moment, running his fingers through his thick dark blond hair, the ends curling from being wet. He was drenched, although the rain had since slowed to a steady trickle. She wondered how long he'd been standing outside before she noticed him. Before she sensed him.

She imagined it had been quite awhile with the condition he was in.

*Beep. Beep. Beep.*

The yellow cab parked along the curb blew its horn, the middle-aged driver growing impatient. Kennedy nearly laughed at the sight of it. She figured taking a cab would've been beneath him those days. Limos and town cars, with chauffeurs and security, were more his level.

Or so she'd heard, anyway.

He glanced back at it, his face flickering with a hidden aggression, before he turned to face her again. His expression softened when their eyes met.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I heard about your mom and I just... I wanted to be here."

*Crack. Crack. Crack.*

It was the sound of her heart being torn apart once again.

"You shouldn't have come," she said. An assault of tears burned her eyes, but she refused to shed a single one. Not while he was there. Not while he was looking at her. So many years later and he still got under her skin. "You know that. You're just making this all so much harder."

"I know, but..." He paused, his blue eyes imploring. "I was hoping I could... I mean, I wondered if it would be okay if..."

"No," she said, knowing right away what he was asking, but there was no way it would happen—not then, and certainly not with the condition he was in. He knew better than to even *ask*.

"But—"

"I said *no*."

He sighed as the driver laid on the horn for the second time. Eyeing her warily, he took a step back, and then another, before turning to leave without saying 'goodbye'.

They'd already said enough goodbyes to last them a lifetime.

*Stomp. Stomp. Stomp.*

Kennedy stiffened as footsteps stomped through the house behind her, on a mission as they hurried her direction. The front door flung open, a tiny human tornado appearing at her side, wearing a fluffy black dress with her brunette hair in pigtails. Despite all the darkness surrounding the little girl, she was all bows and sunshine, innocence and happiness, and Kennedy would do everything in her power to keep her that way. She didn't need to know more devastation. She was too young to endure that kind of pain.

Too young to have her heart broken by Jonathan Cunningham.

“Who was that, Mommy?” the little girl asked, watching the cab as it disappeared into the storm. “Did they come for Grandpa? Were they Nana's friend?”

“It was no one you need to worry about, sweetheart,” Kennedy said, gazing down at a pair of twinkling blue eyes—something her sweet little girl had inherited from *him*. “The man was just a little lost, but I sent him back on his way.”



## Chapter 1

KENNEDY

The beeping of the checkout scanner is monotonous, a dull drone I barely hear anymore, as it melds with Wilson Philips's *Hold On* playing on the loudspeaker radio. The same songs, day in and day out. Same constant beeping. Same everything.

Same customers in and out of the store, buying the same things they've bought before.

My life has become a predictable loop, a real-life version of *Groundhog Day* that I have no intention of trying to change. I'm the personification of an alternate ending where Phil accepts that he's stuck listening to Sonny & Cher every morning until the end of time.

If you'd have asked me years ago if this would be my future, I would've laughed in your face. Me? Kennedy Reagan Garfield? I was destined for greatness.

I'd been named after a pair of iconic presidents. My mother, the idealistic liberal, and my father, a strict conservative, never saw eye-to-eye on much... except for me. They never agreed on healthcare or taxes, but they were both convinced their little *oops* baby would be somebody.

And here I am—somebody, all right. Assistant Manager Somebody at Piggly Q Grocery in a 'blink and miss it' kind of town in upstate New York. Thirteen dollars an hour, forty-plus hours a week, with a full benefits package including (unpaid) vacation days.

Not that I'm ungrateful. I'm doing better than a lot of people. My rent is paid every month. My electricity hasn't been cut off. I've even got overpriced cable! But deep inside, I know this isn't the kind of greatness my parents envisioned for me.

“Assistance needed on three!”

The high-pitched voice squeals over the loudspeaker, drowning out the music. My gaze scans the register area, waiting for someone else to respond, but nobody does. It always falls to me. Shaking my head, I stroll over to lane three, to the young blonde girl running the ancient register, ringing up an older woman's groceries.

The cashier, Bethany, looks at me, dramatically pouting as she wiggles a can of chicken noodle soup in my face. "It's coming up a buck and a quarter but Mrs. McKleski says there's a ninety-nine cent sign back there."

It's \$1.25. I know it is. Even Mrs. McKleski probably knows and just wants to make a fuss about something. I smile, though, and override the register, giving it to the woman at the discount.

I step away to let Bethany finish ringing up the groceries as Mrs. McKleski asks, "How's your father doing?"

I don't have to look to know she's talking to me. I start straightening up the candy rack near the register. "He's hanging in there."

"Thought about baking him a pie," she says. "Does he have a favorite? Apple? Cherry? Thought it might be pumpkin, or maybe pecan."

"I'm sure he'll appreciate whatever you make," I say, "but he's more of a chocolate cream pie guy."

"Chocolate," she mutters. "Should've known."

The radio moves on to Lisa Loeb's *Stay*, and that's about when I decide I'm done with this day. I stroll to the front corner of the store, to where Marcus, the manager, hangs out in an office tucked behind Customer Service. Marcus is tall and slim, with brown skin and black hair that's starting to show signs of impending gray.

"I'm going home," I tell him.

"Now?" He glances at his watch. "It's a little early."

"I'll make up for it," I say, clocking out.

Marcus doesn't argue. He knows I'm good for it, which is why he gives me leniency.

"Actually, I know how you can make up for it," he says. "I need an extra shift worked, if you're willing to pull a double on Friday. Bethany asked for the day off but there's no one to cover."

I want to say no, because I hate running registers, but I'm too nice for that. We both know it. I don't even have to say a word.

“Do me a favor,” he says. “Stop by on your way out and tell Bethany I’m approving her request.”

“Will do,” I say, walking out before he can ask me for anything else. I stroll down the cereal aisle on my way through, snatching a box of Lucky Charms off the shelf. Bethany stands at her register, skimming through a magazine she grabbed from the rack beside her.

I glance at it, rolling my eyes.

*Hollywood Chronicles.*

The epitome of trashy tabloids.

I set my cereal down on the conveyer belt and pull out a few dollars. Bethany closes the magazine and tosses it down in the bagging area before ringing me up.

“Marcus approved your day off,” I tell her.

She squeals. “Really?”

“He told me to tell you.”

“Oh my God!” She shoves my cereal in a white plastic bag. “I didn’t think there was anyone to cover my shift.”

“Yeah, well, I could always use the overtime.”

Bethany squeals again, reaching across the lane to grab ahold of me, squeezing me in a hug. “You’re the best, Kennedy!”

“Special day?” I guess when I pull away, holding the money out to her before she can even tell me my total, hoping she’ll take it instead of hugging me again. Alanis Morissette’s *Ironic* is coming on, and if I don’t get out of here soon, I’m going to lose my sanity.

“Yeah... I mean... sort of.” She blushes as she shoots me a look. “It’s kind of stupid, really. There’s a film that’s supposed to be shooting in the city. My friends and I are hoping to go down and maybe, you know... see what we can see.”

I smile softly. “There’s nothing stupid about that.”

“You don’t think so?”

“Of course not,” I say. “I went to a movie set once.”

Her eyes widen. “Really? *You?*”

The way she says that makes me laugh, although I probably should be offended by her incredulous tone. It’s not like I’m some uptight old lady. I’m not Mrs. McKleski. I’m only a few years older than her. “Yes, really.”

“What movie?”

“It was just one of those teen comedies. The titles all kind of sound the same.”

“Who was in it? Anyone I might know?”

She wants to hear all about it. I can tell by the curious gleam in her eyes, but I have no desire to get into that story. “It was so long ago that I really can’t even say.”

Bethany counts out my change, and my eyes drift to the magazine she’s been reading as I grab my bag. All at once, my insides freeze, ice running through my veins, the cold striking me straight to the bone. Plastered on the cover is a face I know. Even wearing a black hat and dark sunglasses, ducking his head, he’s easily recognizable.

My gut burns, twisting and coiling and *ugh ugh ugh*...

He’s standing beside a woman with platinum blonde hair. While he shies away from the camera, she’s wide-open, looking right at it, her green eyes vivid in the photo. Black leather covers her supermodel frame, while red lipstick accentuates a set of pouty lips. Her skin is a deep tan, like the woman lives on a beach somewhere.

*Ugh*, it makes me sick.

Even I have to admit she’s beautiful.

Below the photograph of the pair is a massive caption, written in bold:

### **JOHNNY AND SERENA’S SECRET WEDDING**

My eyes linger on those words.

I think I’m going to throw up.

“Do you believe it?” Bethany asks.

My gaze lifts to meet hers. “Believe what?”

“That Johnny Cunning and Serena Markson eloped.”

I don’t know what to say. I don’t know what to believe. I don’t know why it even matters to me. Don’t know why my chest feels tight at the mere insinuation that a wedding might’ve happened somewhere, at some point, a wedding where he was the groom but I wasn’t present. I feel like an obsessed, lovesick fangirl, convinced the heartthrob was supposed to be mine, but he wasn’t.

“I think, where Johnny Cunning is concerned, anything’s possible.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Bethany says, picking the tabloid back up as I head for the exit. “Really hoping to run into them this weekend.”

My footsteps falter. “Them?”

“Yeah, the movie that’s filming? It’s the new Breezeo one.”

Something happens inside of me when Bethany says that, something that knocks the wind out of my sails. *Whoa*. It’s a crushing, soul-sucking sensation that starts deep in my chest, right where I used to keep my heart. It’s gone now, locked away in a steel-reinforced safe, padlocked and hidden where no one can get to it without my blessing, the spot where it used to beat now nothing more than a black hole that desperately pulls at the rest of me, trying to swallow me up at the sound of that word.

Breezeo.

“They’re still making those?” I ask, trying to keep my voice steady, but even I can hear the change in my tone. *Pathetic*.

“Of course!” Bethany laughs. “How do you not know? I thought everyone knew.”

“I haven’t really been paying attention.”

More like I’ve actively avoided, but that’s another long story.

“You’ve seen them, though, right?” Bethany narrows her eyes. “Please, tell me you’ve at least watched the others.”

“I’ve caught bits and pieces,” I admit.

She throws her hands up dramatically, like my answer is absurd. “That’s just... insane. Oh my god, you need to watch them! The stories are amazing... so funny and just... I don’t even have words! And Johnny Cunning, that man is serious eye-candy. You’re totally missing out. I’m dead serious, you need to watch them!”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Good,” she says, smiling like she won something. “The first one is called *Transparent* and the second one is *Shadow Dancer*.”

“And the one they’re filming now?”

“*Ghosted*.”

I look away from her when she says that.

“Well, good luck this weekend,” I mumble. “Hope it works out for you.”

Bethany says something else but I don’t stick around to hear it, carrying my Lucky Charms as I jet out to the parking lot. Puddles cover the

asphalt, since it rained most of the morning. It always seems to rain at times like these. I dodge the water, making my way to my car.

It's only a few blocks from the grocery store to my father's house. In this tiny town, it's only a few blocks to get anywhere. I pull my old Toyota into his driveway and park as brakes screech in the street, a big yellow school bus coming to a stop in front of the house. *Perfect timing*. Lights flash and the door opens, a bundle of energy bursting off of the bus and rushing toward me. "Mommy!"

I smile as I gaze at her, her hair wild even though I put it in a tight braid this morning. "Hey, little one."

Three-and-a-half feet tall, just shy of forty pounds—average, for a five-year-old, but that's the only thing *average* about Maddie. Smart, compassionate, creative. She insists on dressing herself, which means nothing ever matches, but the girl somehow makes it work.

Everything I do is all about her—anything to keep the smile on her face, because that smile is what keeps me going. It's the reason I get out of bed in the morning. That smile tells me I'm doing okay.

In a world filled with so much wrong, it's nice to know I'm doing something right.

She wraps her arms around my waist in a hug as the bus pulls away. I hear the door bang and watch as my father strolls out onto the porch.

"Grandpa!" Maddie says excitedly, running to him. "I made you something!"

She yanks her backpack off, dropping it to the old wood, and digs through it for a piece of paper—a drawing. She shoves it at him, and he takes it, a serious look on his face. Rubbing his scruffy chin, he squints his eyes as he studies it. "Hmmm..."

Maddie stands in front of him on the porch, eyes wide. I stifle a laugh. How many times have I seen this play out? His house is wallpapered with her art. Same routine, every single time. She eagerly waits for his assessment, nervous, and without fail, he always says it's the best whatever-she-drew he's ever seen.

"This," he says, nodding, "is the greatest puppy I've ever laid my eyes on."

Maddie laughs. "It's not a puppy!"

"It's not?"



“It’s a seal,” she says, yanking the top of the paper down to look at it. “See? It’s all gray and it’s got a ball!”

“Oh, that’s what I meant! A baby seal is called a puppy, too.”

“Nuh-uh.”

“Yep.”

Maddie looks to me to be referee. “Mommy?”

“They’re called pups,” I tell her.

She turns back to him, grinning. “It’s a good puppy?”

“The best,” he confirms.

She hugs him before grabbing the drawing and running inside the house to hang it up.

I join my father on the porch. “Nice save.”

“Tell me about it,” he says, eyes studying me for a moment. “You’re off work early today.”

“Yeah, well... it’s been one of those days,” I say—one of those days where the past comes rushing back. “Besides, I have to work a double tomorrow, so I’ve earned it.”

“A double.” He looks confused. “Don’t you have plans tomorrow night?”

“Yep.” I pause before correcting myself. “Well, I mean, I did.”

I so rarely have time for a social life that I didn’t even consider that.

“But I could use the money, and I’ve already got a babysitter on tap,” I say, slapping my father on the back. “Can’t say no to that.”

Shaking his head, he sits down on an old rocking chair on the porch. It’s starting to drizzle again, the sky darkening. I lean against the railing, staring out at it as Maddie comes back outside, leaping off the porch.

The girl loves storms.

I can’t remember the last time I played in the rain.

That’s what I think as I watch her running through the small front yard, splashing in the puddles and stomping in the mud.

Did I ever have that much fun?

Was my life ever that carefree?

I can’t remember.

I wish I could.

“Something’s bothering you,” my father says. “It’s *him*, isn’t it?”

Turning around, I lean back against the wooden banister, crossing my arms over my chest as I regard him. He rocks back and forth, an identical chair beside him glaringly vacant. My mother used to sit there with him every morning, drinking coffee before he set off to work.

We buried her a year ago.

Twelve long months have passed, but the wound still feels raw, the memories of that day gnawing away at me. It was the last time I saw *him*, too, as I stood right here on this porch. If the headline I caught earlier is any indication, he's had quite an interesting year.

"What makes you think it has anything to do with him?" I ask, forcing myself not to react, like it doesn't matter, but I'm not an actress.

"You have that look again," my father says. "That vacant, lost stare. I've seen it a few times, and it's always him."

"That's ridiculous."

"Is it?"

"Of course. I'm fine."

"I didn't say you weren't fine. I said you *looked* lost, not that you didn't know your way."

He's eyeing me warily. I'm not sure if there's even a point to lying about it when the truth is written all over my face.

And the truth is, I do feel lost.

"Caught a story in a tabloid," I say. "It claimed he'd gotten married."

"And you believe it?"

I shrug. "I don't know. It doesn't really matter, does it? It's his life. He'll do whatever he wants."

"But?"

"But they're filming in the city again."

"And you're worried he'll show up? Worried he'll try to see her again?"

My father motions past me, at where Maddie is still running around in the rain. I smile softly, as she twirls, oblivious that she's the topic of conversation.

"Or are you worried he won't?" he continues. "Worried he gave up and moved on?"

Maybe, I think, but I don't say it. I don't know which possibility worries me more. I'm terrified he'll force his way into her life and break her

heart with his brokenness like he once broke mine. But at the same time, the thought that he might've given up scares me just as much, because that'll hurt her someday, too.

The rain starts falling harder as I mull over those thoughts. Maddie is running circles around the puddles, soaked. Water streaks her face like falling tears, but she's smiling, so happy, ignorant to my fears.

"I should get going," I say. "Before the storm gets any worse."

"Go on, then," my father says, "but don't think I haven't noticed you didn't answer my question."

"Yeah, well, you know how it is," I mumble, leaning down to kiss my father's cheek before grabbing the backpack from the porch. "Maddie, time to go home, sweetheart!"

Maddie runs for the car, yelling, "Bye, Grandpa!"

"Bye, kiddo," he calls out. "See you tomorrow."

Waving goodbye to my father, I follow her. She's already buckled up when I get in the car.

My eyes seek her out in the rearview mirror. Tendrils of her dark hair fall into her face. She tries to blow them away, her blue eyes watching me. She has a way of looking at you like she's looking through you, like she can see how you're feeling on the inside, those things you try not to let show. It's unnerving sometimes. For being so young, she's quite intuitive.

Which is why I plaster a smile on my face, but I can tell she doesn't buy it.

Home is a small two-bedroom apartment a few blocks away. It's not much, but it's enough for us, and it's what I can afford, so you'll hear no complaints from me. As soon as I open the front door, Maddie takes off through the apartment.

"Straight into the bathtub!" I shout, locking up behind me. I flick on the hallway light as I make my way to the bathroom, passing Maddie's bedroom as I go, seeing she's rooting through her dresser, looking for the perfect pair of pajamas.

She's fiercely independent.

Something she got from her father.

"I'm ready, I'm ready, I'm ready!" she says as she runs into the bathroom when I get the water started. Shoving between the bathtub and

me, she grabs the pink bottle of bubbles and squeezes some under the faucet, giggling, as always, when they start to form. “I got this, Mommy.”

I take a step back. “You got this?”

“Uh-huh,” she says, not looking at me, fixated on the filling bathtub. She sets the bottle of bubbles down on the floor near her feet before turning the knobs, shutting off the water. “I got this.”

Like I said... independent.

“Well, go on then. Do your thing.”

I don't close the door, but I give her some leeway, keeping an eye on her from outside the bathroom. I can hear her splashing, playing in even more water, like the rain hadn't quite been enough. I use the time to gather up laundry, trying to distract myself, but it's pointless.

My mind keeps going back to him.

I sort two weeks worth of dirty clothes into piles on my bedroom floor. Every time I pause, my eyes flicker to my closet, drawn to the old ratty box on the top shelf. I can't see it from here, but I know it's there.

I haven't thought about it in a while. I haven't had a reason. Life has a way of burying memories.

In my case, they're buried under a mountain of other junk in the closet.

I fight it, for a moment, but the pull is too much. Abandoning the laundry, I step straight for the closet, digging out the box.

The cardboard rips when I yank it down, falling apart in my hands. Things scatter around the floor. A picture lands by my feet.

I carefully pick it up.

It's *him*.

He's wearing his school uniform... or as much of it as he ever wore. No sweater, no jacket, and no dress shoes, of course. His white button down is unbuttoned, the tie draped around his neck. Beneath it, he's wearing a plain black t-shirt. His hands are in his pockets, his head cocked to the side. He almost looks like a model, like the picture belongs in a magazine.

A knot forms in my chest. It's suffocating. I can feel the anger and sadness bitterly brewing inside of me, growing stronger as the years go on. My eyes burn with tears, and I don't want to cry, but the sight of him takes me back.

“All done!”