

NO TIME FOR APOLOGIES

NO BRIDES CLUB, BOOK 5



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CHAPTER 1



Kate (or K.A. as the corporate name plate outside her cubicle at work read) Lewis stepped from the dimly lit stairwell into the still bright evening sun of the Briarwood Tavern's rooftop bar in the Tribeca neighborhood of New York City. She waved to her best friend Julie Harrison holding down their usual table, hitched her messenger bag up on her shoulder, and went straight for the antique mahogany bar.

"One fresh cherry margarita coming up," the regular Thursday evening bartender said when she reached her destination.

Kate eyed the glass the bartender lifted from the rack and flipped over with a twist of the wrist. "No, Andre, that won't do it tonight. Give me the monster size."

He looked at her straight on. "You know that's five times what you generally order."

"Yep, I did the math on the walk over."

"You've got it."

While she waited, Kate tapped her fingernails on the

wood and scanned the room, her gaze fixing on a guy sitting alone at a table for two, his eyes glued to his cell phone. Stood up? She blinked. The guy looked familiar, but she couldn't place him.

"Here you go." Andre slid her drink across the bar to her.

"Thanks." She cradled the glass in both palms and walked the table maze to where Julie was sitting.

"Well, are we celebrating?" Julie asked. "Did K.A. Lewis break the glass ceiling? Am I looking at the DeBakker Funds' new Growth and Income Fund Manager, the fund's first female manager?"

"Not exactly." Kate sat, and took a healthy swallow of her drink.

"Want to spill or wait for the others? Julie asked.

Kate glanced toward the entrance. None of the other members of the No Brides Club had arrived yet. The group was her lifeline when she was drowning in frustration over her career. She didn't want to imagine what her life would be like without the support of other women who were equally focused on their careers. Women who were so focused that they'd decided not to weigh themselves down with the baggage of trying to balance romantic relationships on top of the struggle to climb the corporate ladder.

"No, I need to get it out." She was closest to Julie. They'd been friends since college. "But where is everyone, anyway?"

"Kinsley is upstate at her wildlife sanctuary, Rachel has an extra play practice, and Georgina and Melody are working late. So what excuse did your boss give you this round?"

Kate fortified herself with another slug of her margarita. It was the third time she'd been up for this promotion—a promotion she needed to take advantage of the opportunity

she'd been offered recently to buy her apartment. Her apartment building was converting over to condos, and its location was too perfect to even think of moving. She'd earned this.

"Bob started with some BS about how I'd been putting in long hours lately, longer than usual, and my hard work had made a difference in our returns. I was on the edge of my chair, sure he was going to follow that up with an offer for the manager position."

"But, no." Julie shook her head, thumbs up, her mouth holding the O of no.

"No. The higher-ups want to delay naming a new manager." Kate slapped her palm to the table. "I was sure I had it this time."

"But you're still in contention?"

"Supposedly." Kate rested her elbows on the table and splayed her fingers, palms up. "I've paid my dues. Four years as a statistician and analyst for Growth and Income Fund, two of them as senior analyst, two years at a smaller fund family before that, and four years juggling that awful bank job and graduate courses for my MBA. What does it get me? A pat on the back, a small bonus next pay period, and an assistant for two months to help catch up on the backload of work the new software conversion caused."

"That rots."

"And that's not all. They've hired some guy who used to be an associate at the largest private equity firm in Boston as my assistant. No consulting me about it. Yeah, like a guy with those credentials wants to be an assistant statistician. Right." Kate gulped her margarita to the halfway mark. "So, I get to train the guy who'll probably get the manager position."

“What?” Julie placed her drink glass on the table with a clunk.

“Yep, first I asked Bob whether the guy seriously wanted to be an assistant statistician/analyst. I mean investment management is a cutthroat business. People don’t take demotions, unless forced to.”

“What did Bob say?”

Kate swirled her finger tip around the edge of her glass and licked the salt off. “He had the audacity to chuckle and say, ‘No, he thinks he wants to be a professor at some small college upstate, but we’ll convince him otherwise, eh.’ You know, teamwork and all that.”

Julie shook her head.

Kate downed most of the rest of her margarita to combat the bile rising in her throat. “Then I asked Bob outright if I was being asked to train this Smith guy ... his name is John Smith.” Why did that name sound so familiar, other than it was terribly common? “Train the guy for the position I wanted.” She cleared her throat. “Am I talking really loud?”

“No,” Julie said. “Maybe a little. What was Bob’s answer?”

Kate waved a hand at her friend. “He said I was still his first choice for the job, that the hiring came from higher up. His hands were tied.” She leaned forward. “Well, I’m going to untie them. I don’t care what John Smith’s experience is. He’s been hired as my assistant, and I’m not going to let him take my promotion.”

“That’s the spirit,” Julie said. “I’m going to get a drink. You want another one?”

Kate eyed the empty monster glass. “I’ll wait. I should eat something first.”

Julie headed to the bar, and Kate’s gaze followed her as far as the lone guy she’d spotted earlier. The bar server

approached him and stood talking far longer than it would take her to get his drink order. She flipped her hair over her shoulder and said something that made the guy laugh. The server was flirting with him. Kate drew her lips into straight line. Not that there was any reason that should interest her. She was still focused on him after the server left and Julie returned.

“That is a nice view,” Julie said before she sat.

“Hmmm?” Kate said.

“The eye candy sitting over there by himself.”

“He looks so familiar, like I know him from somewhere,” Kate answered as much to herself as to Julie.



“I TRUST your stay with us was enjoyable,” The Greenwich Hotel concierge said as she opened the door for Jon Smith to exit.

“Excellent,” he answered. It wasn’t the Four Seasons, but had been more than fine for a one-night stay. Jon squinted at the bright sunlight that greeted him as he stepped outside. He was well-rested and ready for his meeting. Staying at the hotel had saved him the half hour to Rhinecliff and the two-hour early train to New York this morning. Getting up three-and-a-half hours before his meeting versus getting up an hour before should have been a no brainer. But it also entailed getting someone to stay with his grandfather, check on his livestock last night, and come feed them this morning.

Jon pulled open the gleaming glass doors to the DeBakker Mutual Funds office building, thinking he should be nervous, excited, *something* walking into his first face-to-face with a new employer. But he felt nothing but a little

curious, maybe since he hadn't pursued the statistician position he was starting Monday. His former girlfriend Olivia had done that for him, before she'd thrown him over for a surgeon she'd met over coffee at the Westchester Medical Center when Grandpa had still been in inpatient rehabilitation there. Olivia had been staying at the farm with Jon then and had come to hospital with him.

He let the door drop closed behind him. Olivia had her father call a friend, who happened to be one of the DeBakkers of DeBakker Funds soon after Grandpa had had his stroke and Jon had moved from Boston to his grandfather's place. By the time he'd received the email setting up the Skype interview, she'd tired of what she called his playing at professor and gentlemen farmer. She'd needed a man she could depend on to keep her in the style Daddy had made her accustomed to. By then, Jon, as power of attorney for his grandfather after his stroke, had learned of the home equity loan Grandpa couldn't afford that he'd taken to come out of retirement and start up a grass-fed beef operation. The summer gig with DeBakker-Gelm would knock out a good chunk of that loan before Jon started his lower paying college instructor position in the fall.

His cell phone pinged as he pressed the elevator button for the fourth floor.

Morning. Thought I'd let you know I've made it to another day.

Grandpa and his gallows humor.

Good to know.

Jon stepped out into the hall.

Having breakfast with my babysitter.

He and his grandfather had gone `round and `round about Grandpa needing someone to stay with him, and Jon had finally gotten him to agree to the widow from up the

road. Jon suspected his grandfather had a thing for Dottie—or at least he had before the stroke. Starting Monday, Dottie's 18-year-old grandson would be stopping in to do the chores and be there for Grandpa, and Dottie would be coming in the early evening to prepare supper.

Enjoy. I should be home about three.

Okay.

John checked the suite numbers on the offices for 410, where the funds' analysis and statistics offices were.

"Good morning," a young woman behind the reception desk greeted him. "How can I help you?"

"I'm Jon Smith. I have an appointment with Robert Conway."

"I'll let Bob know." She smiled, her gaze lingering on him a moment longer than he was comfortable with before she picked up her phone.

He still wasn't accustomed to the difference people—well, mostly women—saw in his appearance since he'd taken up swimming in college and dropped the extra 40 pounds he'd carried in high school. And he'd built up some muscle taking over for his grandfather on the farm.

"Jon." An affable man about Jon's father's age stepped into the reception area and offered his hand. "I'm Bob Conway."

After shaking hands, Bob said. "Leave your bag here with reception, and I'll take you up to HR to get all that out of the way first."

Jon handed the receptionist the gym bag he'd brought as his overnight bag and walked with Bob into the hall.

"Stairs good with you?" Bob asked, reaching for the knob to the stairwell door. "It's only two flights." He sized up Jon and patted his own slight paunch. "And I could use the exercise."

The old shame weighed his chest. "That's fine." Jon shoved his hands in his pockets while he waited for Bob to open the door.

"When you're done in HR," Bob said. "I'll introduce you to the senior statistician you'll be working with and the three of us can go to lunch."

"Sounds good." Jon grasped the handrail. That would shoot his plan to catch the 12:30 train and be home by three. He should still be home in time for afternoon chores. Grandpa had beef cattle now, not dairy, so the afternoon schedule wasn't as important, and their neighbor had said she'd stay as long as needed. Of course, Grandpa thought that was not at all. Jon made a mental note to phone Dottie first about the change in plans and then clue his grandfather in, so he didn't send her home.

An hour and a half later, after he'd filled out all the required papers, sat through an interactive video about corporate compliance, and completed the required computer modules on sexual harassment in the workplace and safety, Jon was back in the reception area of the statistics and analytics offices, sitting and waiting for Bob and the senior statistician to join him for lunch. He stood when he heard Bob's voice in the hall and looked in that direction. Bob walked toward him accompanied by a woman about Jon's age with brunette hair artfully pinned back from her attractive face. *Hmm*. Bob hadn't mentioned his new boss was a woman. Not that it mattered or that Bob should have.

As the pair stepped into the reception area, the office lighting played tricks with his eyes and superimposed an image of his high school secret crush and nemesis on the poised woman.

"Jon," Bob said, "this is ..."

Jon blinked. “Kate Lewis.” The lighting hadn’t been playing tricks.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For sweet romance author Jean C. Gordon, writing is a natural extension of her love of reading. From that day in first grade when she realized t-h-e was the word the, she's been reading everything she can put her hands on. Jean and her college-sweetheart husband share a 175-year-old farmhouse in Upstate New York with their daughter and her family. Their son lives nearby.

