

LOVE AND OTHER OBSTACLES: Part 1

By Jill Kemerer

A mud pit?

Karen Joliet tugged the hem of her white T-shirt with Eagle Bank scrawled across the chest as she stood in line to register. How did she get talked into the obstacle course?

Participation in the annual corporate Olympics was mandatory, and she usually signed up for the mile walk. Sedentary thirty-five-year olds couldn't be expected to plop into a mud pit and shimmy under ropes, could they?

Karen sighed. The event *was* for a good cause. The funds they raised went to the local food bank. Still, no one would notice if she backtracked to her car and drove home. The line moved quickly, though. Only two more people waited in front of her. A beautiful September sky spread cornflower blue over the neatly manicured park, and the smell of freshly cut grass improved her mood.

"Number 562. Number 563." A perky blonde held two white bibs. Karen extended her hand, brushing fingers with a man as he reached for his.

"Oh, excuse me," she said. Heat rose to her cheeks. A glass of tall, cute, and out-of-her-league stood inches away. Looked about her age. Maybe older. His lips curved into a smile that stretched all the way to his green eyes flecked with gold. She didn't mean to hold her breath, but she couldn't help herself.

"This one's yours." He handed her the bib with 562 on it then fastened 563 to his Eagle Bank shirt. "I've seen you in the cafeteria. What department do you work in?"

He'd seen her? She didn't recognize him, and she was pretty sure she wouldn't forget that handsome face.

“Charles Stockbridge.” He thrust his hand out. “My friends call me Charlie. I’m up on the third floor with the other computer programmers.”

She took his hand, a warm sensation creeping up her skin at his touch. “Karen. I’m on the fourth floor. Accounting.”

“Ah, a numbers guru.” Charlie hitched his chin toward the course. “Looks like we’re teammates. Ever do one of these before?”

“No.” She grimaced. “I’m not sure I want to.”

He chuckled as they strolled to the starting line. “Your idea of a perfect Saturday doesn’t include jumping through tires, climbing a wall, and wading through mud?”

“A wall? No one mentioned a wall. I’ll be lucky to get through the tires.” As for the rest of the course? *Doubtful*. She slid a sideways glance his way and relaxed at the easy confidence he exuded. Dare she be honest? “My perfect Saturday would be at the bookstore, sipping coffee, and buying a stack of magazines.”

Her ex-boyfriend complained time and again about the hours she wasted reading when she could have been off on adventures with him. He’d never understood books *were* an adventure to her. The only waste was the five years she waited for his proposal that never came.

Charlie grinned. “Books and coffee. Two of my favorite things. My ex-fiancé made fun of me.”

Karen’s eyebrows lifted. “Really? My ex-boyfriend did the same.”

His glance slid over her, appreciation lighting his eyes. “Looks like we’re about to start.”

The contestants crowded to the orange line spray-painted across the grass. A slim, athletic brunette in cute running shorts stood to Karen’s left. Charlie stood to her right. Her palms grew moist. *Don’t make a fool of yourself, Karen.*

He grinned, nudging her arm with his elbow. “You ready?”

No, she wasn’t ready! The gunshot snapped. Her feet rushed forward, and she jogged the short distance to the tires. Charlie got through them quickly, and he waited at the end, clapping and urging her to keep her knees up. Her breathing came in short gasps, but she made it through and hustled to the wooden wall with ropes attached.

“Here, you go first.” He handed her the rope. “I’ll give you a boost if you need it.”

She gripped the rope and put one foot in front of the other as she attempted to climb the wall. She couldn’t find her footing.

“Just run around it,” Charlie said.

“No, I’ll make it over.” *Eventually*. She huffed her way up the rope and dropped to the other side.

A split-second later, Charlie appeared next to her. They hurried to the final obstacle. The mud pit. Brave souls flopped under the ropes to wiggle-worm their way through. Bystanders hooted, cheered, and whistled.

“Come, on.” Charlie rubbed his hands together. “Let’s get muddy.”

Karen closed her eyes. Swallowed. Felt his feather-light touch on her hand. And she lifted her chin, nodded, and dropped into the mud. Charlie splashed in next to her. They worked their way through the cool liquid until they reached the end. Together they crossed the finish line.

He high-fived her. Mud and all.

“Tell me you’re free this afternoon,” Charlie said with a gleam in his eye. “I want to take you...”

What do YOU think? Where does Charlie want to take Karen? Email me at jill@jillkemerer.com and I'll pick ONE wonderful reader's suggestion. Look for the next installment of Love and Other Obstacles this summer!