

LOVE AND OTHER OBSTACLES: Part 2

By Jill Kemerer

In “Love and Other Obstacles: Part 1” Karen Joliet meets Charlie Stockbridge at the annual corporate Olympics, and they slosh through a mud pit.

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

Part 2:

"I know a place I think you'd like." Charlie wiped muddy hands down his equally filthy shorts.

Karen wanted to shout, "yes," but caution flared. She didn't know him. What if he was some creep? *Yeah, because corporate Olympics is the perfect spot to stalk someone. Get a grip, already!* "Where do you want to go?"

"It's a surprise. Do you know Lil' Smokies downtown?"

"Everyone knows Lil' Smokies. Best barbecue in the city."

His smile warmed her down to her toes. "Meet me out front, say four o'clock."

"Okay."

"See you in a few hours."

Karen chatted with coworkers as she made her way back to her car, but she barely concentrated on a word they said. Had she done the right thing agreeing to meet Charlie? What kind of guy was he?

And what should she wear?

She laid a towel on the front seat of her car and drove back to her condo. Her cat Vega meowed as she entered the apartment.

"Hey kitty, did you miss me?" She bent to pet the long-haired gray cat who'd kept her company for seven years since she'd been divorced. "I'm skipping out on our dinner and movie date. If I'm not back by midnight, call the police."

Vega purred, arching her back in response. After a hot shower and an hour of deciding on an outfit, Karen sprayed her shoulder-length dark brown waves, checked to make sure her mascara hadn't smudged and pressed her lips together to distribute the dark pink lipstick she'd applied. One last cuddle with Vega and Karen took a deep breath and headed downtown.

Two women loaded with shopping bags strolled the sidewalk in front of the entrance to Lil' Smokies. No sign of Charlie. Karen adjusted her lavender sundress and denim jacket. Had she overdressed? Anything besides her usual yoga pants and oversized T-shirt felt like getting ready for a gala.

What if he doesn't show?

"Karen, you made it." And there he was. Even more appealing in khaki shorts and a navy blue polo shirt. Sunglasses hid his green eyes, and gel tamed his light brown hair. "You look...wow. Beautiful."

Heat crept up her neck, and she couldn't stop her smile if she tried. "Thank you. You look nice, too."

"Are you ready?" He held his arm out, and she hooked hers in his.

"Yes. Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

They walked past the BBQ joint and several funky boutiques before turning toward the river.

“Have you always lived in Virginia?” she asked, trying not to think about his muscles under her hand or the refreshing, masculine scent of his cologne.

“No, I grew up in Indiana. Been living in Delaney for six years now. What about you?”

“Born and raised right here. My parents moved to the country a few years ago, but they’re only forty-five minutes away.” The late afternoon sun cast a glow on the trees planted in front of the stores. Charlie directed her down an alley, away from the brightness of the day.

Her nerves twitched—weren’t alleys unsafe? If worse came to worse, she had a full tube of pepper spray in her purse. She’d never had to use it, but then, she hadn’t been out with a stranger in a long time.

“Um, are you sure this is right?”

“Here we are.” Charlie stopped in front of an old brick wall. An ancient sign for Dot’s Vacuum Repair hung at an angle. The words were barely visible it had faded so much. A dumpster stood to the right, and they faced a steel door that had seen better days. The locks on it appeared to have been tampered with. Yellowed newspaper hugged the wall in front of weeds that had sprung up through a crack in the sidewalk.

“What is this place? Don’t tell me it’s a vacuum repair shop.” The hair on her arms rose. “I’m not going in there.”

“It’s not what it looks like.” He took off his sunglasses. His green eyes danced with merriness. “You’ll have to trust me on this.”

Trust him? She barely knew him. And this alley screamed, “abandoned and dangerous.” She let go of his arm and hugged herself. “I don’t know...”

“I really think you’re going to like this.”

Lord, I need some guidance here.

Charlie took her hand in his and opened the door, which swung open easily. Karen squared her shoulders and decided to go for it. She followed him inside.

They entered a narrow, dark hallway with a set of stairs ascending directly in front of them. Charlie led her around the staircase, turning to face another set of stairs, but these led down. He kept her hand in his as they descended. The walls were painted deep purple, and the paint seemed fresh compared to the entrance. A sparkling chandelier hung above a small landing at the bottom.

“Do you still trust me?” His breath felt warm against her cheek.

The fresh paint and chandelier piqued her curiosity. Strangely enough, she did trust him. She nodded.

“Well, what do you think?” Charlie ushered her inside. Karen’s eyes widened as she took the space in. She would have never guessed a creepy alley and unmarked door could lead to this.

Where did Charlie take Karen? And is it safe or scary? Tune in to find out! The next installment of Love and Other Obstacles will be sent to newsletter subscribers this winter! I’d love to hear your guess about where Charlie took Karen. Email me at jill@jillkemerer.com!