

LOVE AND OTHER OBSTACLES: Part 3

By Jill Kemerer

In “Love and Other Obstacles: Part 1” Karen Joliet meets Charlie Stockbridge at the annual corporate Olympics, and they slosh through an obstacle course with a mud pit. He invites her on a date that afternoon, and in Part 2, Karen meets Charlie downtown. They walk through a creepy alley and descend a staircase to find...

“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.

Part 3:

“Where are we?” Karen spun to face Charlie, her face inches from his. He grinned, appreciation lighting his eyes. This guy was full of surprises, and she liked it, which was odd for a routine-loving gal like herself.

“It’s a secret.” Charlie took her by the shoulders and gently nudged her toward a reception desk. The low hum of conversation surrounded them, and the enormous room smelled of old books and gardenias. An odd combination, but it somehow worked. Bookshelves lined the walls, and several square wooden tables held flickering votive candles in glass holders. The dark hardwood floors gleamed as if recently restored. Large chandeliers matching the one above the entrance dangled throughout the room.

Charlie's hand pressed against the small of Karen's back, warming her skin under her dress and denim jacket.

"It doesn't look all that secret." She gestured to the couples browsing the shelves, sitting at the tables, and relaxing on couches and chairs scattered around. What was this place?

"Don't let the crowd fool you. Not just anyone can come here." He led her to the desk where a guest book was placed along with an ostrich feather pen. "It's by invitation only."

Invitation only? To a bookstore? She fought to keep her lips from twitching. He seemed so serious. Her previous fear and nervousness had vanished as soon as he opened the door. Being surrounded by well-dressed people and books could hardly be described as threatening. She folded her arms across her chest and cocked her head to the side. "Okay. Fess up. What exactly is this?"

He reached beyond her, grazing her arm in the process, and plucked the pen from its stand. "It's my book club."

His book club? Hmm...

"This isn't like any book club I've ever been to."

"Tell me about the ones you attended." He scrawled his name on the line and handed her the pen.

"Well, for one, they're usually at someone's house or the library." She added her signature and studied the room. "And we all read the same book before sitting around discussing it."

"Does everyone actually read the book?" He nodded to a section of shelves she hadn't noticed earlier. They strolled that way.

"Honestly? No. I've been guilty of skimming a few and not reading others. But I try."

“Why do you skim?”

Heat flushed up her neck. “We take turns choosing the titles and...” She shrugged.

He laughed a deep, musical laugh. It made her smile. She knew she’d be remembering that laugh later.

“What titles don’t you like to read?” he asked.

They reached the first row, and she trailed her fingers along the book spines. “Anything boring or terrifying. I can’t read horror novels. I’m a scaredy-cat.”

“Hardly. You came here with me, didn’t you?” He drew a book from an upper shelf.

“What do you consider boring?”

She twisted her lips and looked upward. “It’s hard to say. Sometimes a cover grabs me or the teaser on the back looks fantastic, but when I actually start reading?” She pretended to yawn.

Charlie smiled, leaning his shoulder against the shelf and handing her the book. “What about this one?”

She held it up. “*Ulysses*?” She scrunched her nose and shook her head rapidly. “Oh, no. I tried this one. Six pages in and my eyes crossed. I wanted to throw it across the room.” Well, she actually had thrown it across the room, not that he needed to know that tidbit.

He took the book from her and placed it back on the shelf.

She inwardly sighed. James Joyce was probably his favorite author. Why did she always have to say exactly what was on her mind? Look at where it had gotten her so far—living alone with a cat for a roommate. Vega was a good kitty, though.

“I couldn’t get into it either.” A sheepish look crossed his face. “You can tell a lot about someone based on their reaction to a classic.”

Was he testing her or something?

“Let’s find a table.” He waved to the seating area behind her.

“Will you tell me more about this place?”

He held a chair out for her, and her heart swooned a little. She appreciated a gentlemanly gesture.

“Of course.” He clasped his hands and let them rest on the table. “But I have conditions.”

Conditions? She straightened, her smile slipping. “What kind of conditions?”

“This book club is by invitation only. Can you keep it a secret?”

She nodded.

“Good.” He leaned back in his chair. “If you want to come back, you have to be a member. And if you want an invitation, you have to...”

What is the condition of being invited into Charlie’s secret book club? And will it be out of Karen’s comfort zone? Tune in to find out! The next installment of Love and Other Obstacles will be sent to newsletter subscribers later this winter. I’d love to hear your guess about how Karen can be invited. Email me at jill@jillkemerer.com!