

LOVE AND OTHER OBSTACLES: Part 4 The End

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, and in Part 3, they enter Charlie’s secret book club, which is by invitation only and to get an invitation, Karen must...

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

Karen nodded.

“Good.” Charlie 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...”

Part 4 The End:

Karen tried to anticipate Charlie’s conditions. Hop on one foot for ten seconds? Read that mind-boggling James Joyce book? Recite the Dewey Decimal system?

“And if you want an invitation you have to...go out to dinner with me tonight. Anyplace you want. What’s your favorite restaurant?” The words sounded assured, but the way Charlie tugged at his collar made him seem vulnerable. That vulnerability clinched the deal for Karen, but she didn’t want to appear too eager.

“What if I already have a date?” With my cat and a pizza.

His smile slid from his face, and he shrugged. “It wouldn’t surprise me. A beautiful, nice, intelligent girl like you. I understand.”

Beautiful? Nice? Intelligent? She almost batted her lashes.

“I don’t have a date,” she said. “But before I reveal my favorite restaurant, I need to know the rules of this book club. Why should I join?”

Charlie placed his hand over hers. It felt warm, strong. “Well, one rule is you never, ever have to read *Ulysses*. But if you do, you have to promise to explain it to me.”

She laughed. “Done. What else?”

“You can’t tell any of your friends about this place.”

“Why not?” She pretended to be offended.

“It wouldn’t be a secret then, now would it?” His lazy smile caressed her.

“But why does it need to be a secret?”

“My married friends kept moaning about how expensive date night was and how they just wanted a place to relax without their kids. My single friends were tired of the bar scene. I thought, why not create an oasis, a place where my friends can come and enjoy themselves without forking over a hundred dollars for a meal and then having nowhere to go but a club or a movie? Of course, most of my friends love books, so it ended up being a win-win for everyone. All members have the access code, so it’s available anytime.”

“But how did you afford all this?” She swept her arms to encompass the space. “All these books?”

“My friends and I had extensive libraries, and we go to auctions and estate sales. One night a month we all meet here to shelve the new books. It’s a lot of fun. I hope you’ll join us.”

Karen let the novelty of the place wash over her. An oasis for book-loving adults. Genius! How fun it would be to add to the collection.

“But the space?” She frowned. “Surely renting or owning this place is expensive.”

He sighed, a shy smile playing on his lips. “I launched a popular website in my twenties and sold it. Let’s just say, I never have to work again, but I enjoy working, so I do.”

“And you spent your money to help your friends?” This man was full of surprises. She could see herself relaxing at one of these tables. Yes, this book club was for her. And the man sitting across from her?

“Well, it was more selfish than you’re making it out to be. I wanted a place to come, too. It’s more of an investment. In life.”

“You sold me. I’d love to be a member.” She pretended to think hard. “As far as my favorite restaurant, I have more than one, but I think we should head back to Lil’ Smokies.”

“Good choice.” His eyes sparkled in appreciation.

“Best barbecue in town.”

“Sure is.” He grew serious. “It means a lot to me that you like this place.”

“I do. And I like you, too.”

“The feeling is mutual. Let’s get dinner.”

They walked arm-in-arm out of the book club toward the restaurant...and to they’re future together.

THE END

I hope you enjoyed this serialized short story! Email me at jill@jillkemerer.com!