

# THE BOX SOCIAL

Part Two | Dianne L. Christner

One child lagged behind as the others scurried from the room. At Charity's gentle touch, the new student looked up, his small face opening into a smile. It wasn't Joseph's smile; in fact, she saw no resemblance whatsoever to Joseph, causing her to wonder if Joseph married Michael's mother because the child was his or because he had fallen in love with her. Either way, he had dropped Charity like a hot potato. Her heart gave a tumble as she realized that even if she never knew what had actually transpired, she would love Joseph's son just as she did all the other four-year-olds in her Sunday school class.

Michael reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, brightly painted toy.

"What have you there?"

"A wagon. My mama gaved me this." Michael's head dipped, his London accent softened. "She died."

So the rumor was true. Joseph had returned to Pleasantville as a widower,

and she would never see the English woman who had stolen the man she loved. Charity felt altogether stricken as this news settled in, stricken: for the child, for Joseph, and for what might have been. Even though she hated him for betraying her, she also pitied him for his loss.

Michael gave the wagon's wooden wheel a spin.

Charity smiled. "It's very special. Your mother must have loved you very much."

He nodded. "Papa, too."

Before she could interpret that statement, Pastor Vincent Stone entered the room with Joseph, and Michael scrambled forward. "Papa!"

Joseph curled the boy into a snug, one-armed squeeze as the pastor introduced him.

"We have met," Charity said crisply.

"Oh?"

Of course the pastor was new to Pleasantville and could not have known.

She regretted Pastor Stone's puzzled, nearly wounded tone and tried to school her emotions.

The young pastor quickly recovered. "Miss Briggs is one of our finest teachers. She's done a wonderful job on the box social committee as well." His voice took on a tender quality, and he gave her a friendly smile. "I was just telling Mr. Jamison about our box social."

"I wouldn't miss it!" Joseph said with enthusiasm and took a step toward her, his confidence barely wavering. "In fact, Charity, I—"

Well she wouldn't have it! He would not come back to Pleasantville and break her heart again! "How nice for Michael. He can get better acquainted with his new friends," she blurted out, then quite abruptly, she excused herself and breezed from the room.

She was nearly to the main entrance of the white-steepled church when she realized she had left her cloak in the Sunday school room. This April day in New York, it was too cold to go outside without it.

Regrettably, she returned to the classroom, giving pause just outside the partly jarred door.

Bits of conversation filtered through. "You seem to take a personal interest in Charity." That was Joseph.

"I take an interest in all my church members." Stone sounded defensive. "And I've never seen Miss Briggs so. . . agitated."

"We used to be a couple. I wish we still were."

Charity painfully squeezed her eyes shut over the news that Joseph still cared. She stood for a long moment, striving for composure.

"Charity? Were you looking for this?"

At the sound of her name, she slowly opened her eyes. Joseph stood in the open doorway. Beyond Joseph, Pastor Stone's face was creased with concern.

"We need to talk," Joseph said softly.

Charity grabbed the cloak and couldn't resist a curt, "Why don't you write me a letter?"

*Read Part 3 of The Box Social next month.*