

THE BOX SOCIAL

Part Four | Dianne L. Christner

Charity suddenly got the funny sensation that someone was watching her. She glanced toward the door. Pastor Vincent Stone leaned nonchalantly against its jamb.

At his wink, she smiled at her students. “Children, you are dismissed now.” She gave them each a special word as they passed, all the while trying to quash the swift flash of apprehension, a combination of his unexpected appearance and Becca’s unforgettable remark: *The preacher’s falling in love with you.* “How long have you been standing there?”

He straightened. “Only a moment. You’re excellent with the children.”

She moved to a low table and seated herself. “I enjoy them.”

“You’ll make a good mother someday.”

Charity crossed her arms. “Is that what you stopped in here to tell me, Pastor Stone?”

“Please call me Vincent. We’ve worked closely together, especially since we started planning the box social. Being a pastor can

sometimes be a lonely thing.”

“Very well, Vincent,” she said carefully, her dread intensifying.

“Pardon me.” In this instance, even Joseph provided a welcome respite. “I was looking for Michael.” His eyes darkened in accusation.

“Oh.” Charity wondered if Joseph was upset because he had overheard Vincent or because Michael was gone. “He went with Tommy Cummins to find you.”

“Thanks.” Joseph wheeled and left without further comment. His abrupt departure hurt her more than she cared to admit.

“The reason I stopped by. . . I was wondering if you are helping to decorate the church next Saturday afternoon?”

Charity swept her gaze from the empty doorway back to the pastor, but it fell across Michael’s toy wagon. “Mm, yes. I’ll be there.” She rose and went to the toy, worried that the child had left it behind. “I’m sorry to run off, but I’m afraid Michael will need this

toy. He carries it at all times. His mother gave it to him.”

“I understand. I’ll see you on Saturday, Miss Briggs.”

Charity smiled as she placed the toy in her cloak pocket and hoped she wouldn’t come to regret it when she said, “If I’m to call you Vincent, then its Charity.”

He beamed and helped her into her cloak. “Thank you, Charity.”

She nodded and hurried off, dodging an elderly couple and maneuvering through small clusters of lingering churchgoers. She did not see Michael anywhere until she stepped outside and spotted him across the churchyard.

She picked up the hem of her long, full skirt and ran. “Mr. Jamison! Michael!”

Joseph turned, his expression no longer angry, but hopeful. She drew up next to them and stooped down to Michael, slipping her hand into her cloak and retrieving the wooden wagon. Breathlessly, she said, “You forgot this.”

Michael’s eyes lit up, and his small hand shot out. “My mama gaved me this. She

died.”

“I know, sweetheart.” Charity cupped his cheek with her hand.

“Thank you, Charity. He would have missed it. It’s very important to him right now.” She straightened, and Joseph’s voice softened to a whisper. “He sleeps with it.”

“I thought that might be the case.”

“Charity, please, allow me to call on you this afternoon?”

She shook her head.

Joseph took her arm and said in a charming tease, “Then I’ll just have to win your box at the social.”

“You wouldn’t!”

“Why don’t you want Papa to win the game?”

Charity blushed and touched the concerned child on the tip of his nose. “Your papa’s a winner. He has you.” Then she gave Joseph a stern look. “That should be more than enough. Now I really must go.”

“This is not about winning, Charity. It’s about love.”

Read Part 5 of The Box Social next month.