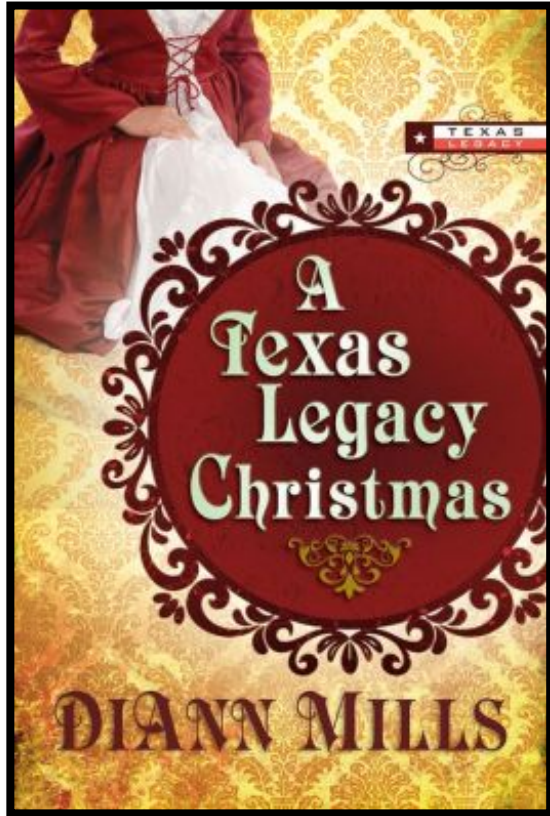




A Texas Legacy Christmas

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***Thursday, November 2, 1911
New York City***

Chapter 1

A blast of wind seized Zack Kahler's breath and threatened to keep it captive. He tightened the scarf around his neck and pulled up the collar of his wool coat. Buttoning it before he left the newspaper office on Times Square had done little good, for the wind still whipped up inside his coat and chilled him to the bone.

Zack lowered his head and held on to his derby hat as he continued to trudge down the street toward his small apartment. He noted the huge snowflakes covering the white ground from earlier in the day. New York's winters were entirely too cold for him. Exhaling an icy vapor, he remembered his first winter here and how the little chilled clouds appeared like magic in the frosty air. That optimistic attitude about freezing temperatures soon ended.

Three more days and he'd head home to Texas where he'd never complain about the heat again. Although he would miss the Broadway plays and a handful of fine restaurants,

he would not miss the woman who expected him to spend his entire pay on her entertainment, frowned on his interest in church, and turned her affections to a wealthier man who carried an impressive name.

Still fuming about the mannerisms of Miss Elizabeth Hanington and how she hadn't really broken his heart, Zack realized the said young woman and the cold blowing around him had much in common. They were probably kin. Zack chuckled. He needed to get home and take over ownership of the The Frontier Press before he wished dire circumstances upon Elizabeth.

An automobile horn blared a few feet behind him. Zack lost his footing on the ice and snow, sending him backwards onto the sidewalk. He despised those new fangled machines. Give him a horse any day. With his posterior smarting, his pride definitely damaged, and irritation soaring through his veins, Zack attempted to right himself.

"Mister, let me help you," a small voice said. "You took a nasty spill."

Zack stared up into the face of a curly-headed, freckle-faced little boy. The child held out a thin hand. "No thanks." Zack smiled. "I'm not that old yet. But I appreciate the offer." He dug his gloved hand into the snow for leverage and slowly stood.

"Looks like you did all right without me." The boy shivered. No doubt his dirty and torn clothes provided little warmth. A quick glance down revealed bare toes sticking out from the ends of his shoes.

"How about a quarter for your trouble?" Zack reached into his pocket and pulled out the coin.

The boy's eyes widened. "Thanks, mister."

"You're quite welcome." Zack blinked. He must have fallen hard because he suddenly saw two of them. But he'd fallen on his rear, not his head. "Are there two of you?"

"Yes sir." Two voices chorused a reply.

Zack winced at the pitiful, ragged pair and dug deep into his pocket for another quarter. He handed the other boy a coin. The two grinned. Never had he seen so much carrot-red hair and matching freckles.

"We'll be on our way," the first one said. "Thank you very much. Be careful and don't slip again."

Zack nodded and watched the two hurry down the street. Perhaps he should have offered to buy them something to eat or asked them where they lived. He patted his back side and adjusted his heavy woolen coat, feeling a bit guilty for its warmth. What kind of parents allowed children to run about the street so scantily clad? Unless they were. .
.Reaching inside his coat pocket, he realized his wallet was missing.

“Hey, you two. Come back here.”

The twins raced off, leaving a trail of laughter in their wake.

Anger propelled Zack to cast aside his fear of falling again, and he took long strides after the two pint-size trouble-makers.

“You little thieves. Wait till I get my hands on you.” All of the frustration of the weather and Elizabeth’s discarding him culminated in the pursuit of the two imps scurrying down the street with his wallet.

The boys crossed a busy street into the path of a horse and buggy from one direction and those dreaded automobiles from the other. Horses whinnied and car horns blared like an off-key orchestra. The boys made it across the street, and Zack was gaining ground. His dash into the street triggered the traffic to protest one more time. His left foot slipped, but he caught himself and realized the distance between him and the pair was narrowing. In the next instant, he had his hands on both of their arms.

Zack whirled the two boys around to face him. They couldn’t have been more than six or seven years old. Fright dug deep into their amber-colored eyes.

“My wallet.”

The boy on the left reached inside his tattered pants and pulled out the wallet.

“Did you take anything?”

Both of them shook their head while he released one and dropped his wallet into his coat pocket.

“Are you lying?” He’d throttle the two if they were his. What a conspiracy.

“No sir,” the boy on the left said. “We didn’t have time to look through it.”

“Sir, is there a problem here?”

Zack studied the face of a square-looking policeman who had obviously seen the wild chase. “I’m not sure.” He refused to let go of the boys until he finished lecturing them on the consequences of stealing. Also, he intended to take them to their parents.

The policeman shook his finger at the pair. "Curly, Charlie, are you two pick pocketing again?"

Wide eyes stared back at the policeman and then at Zack.

"I thought as much. This time I'm personally taking you back to the orphanage. You're too young to be living on the street. Gets much colder, and I'll be hauling your bodies to the morgue."

Orphans? Twins? Zack's ice-hard heart quickly began to thaw.

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