

# DONE WITH THE DASHING

## Chapter 1

Maggie Mackenzie's slippers crunched into the pre-dawn snow as she lifted the latch and pushed open the neighbor's gate. She felt vulnerable dressed in her bathrobe with flashlight in hand at 3:00 a.m. *How ironic! I look like a "cat" burglar.* She snickered, and her mouth curved into a smile. Her breath formed little puffs in the morning air. It was unusually cold for East Texas.

*Who's insane enough to be slogging around in the middle of the night taking care of a furry little chore on her to-do list?* She rolled her eyes. *I am.*

Maggie's every step shattered the layer of crust on the fragile, frosted ground. Icy crumbs lodged between her socks and fuzzy house shoes. She shivered.

She worked her way along the bushes to her neighbor's garage and felt for the hidden key above the door. Her fumbling, cold fingers bumped the key, and she listened as it glanced off the concrete into what sounded like leaves. *Great!*

She tightened the belt on her plaid flannel robe and dropped to her knees. She shined the light and felt along the wall, her fingers growing numb. She cringed at the thought of searching the sticky, damp leaf pile blown into the corner by the rainstorm before the snow. Maggie had a good mind to march home, sleep late, and tell her family there'd be no Thanksgiving dinner this year.

She could send the family to McDonalds . . . and ship Samson, the cat expecting breakfast, to join his owners on their cruise. No plunging her hand into Thanksgiving Tom with his innards wadded in paper. No stinky giblet gravy for lunch.

Had her husband, David, ever noticed no one else liked that kind of gravy? *I've pointed it out often enough. I can hear him now: "But, honey. It wouldn't be the holidays without giblets."* It wouldn't be the "holidays" without the stuff everybody else expected *her* to do.

Maggie hoped the twenty-pound bird back at the house had cooperated in the thawing process and wasn't as frozen as her tender feet. It'd be her luck, although she'd defrosted it according to the package directions.

On her second stab into the pile, her fingers seized the cold metal key. She fumbled with the lock and entered the darkened garage, her nose instantly assaulted by the disgusting odor of gas and motor oil.

"Here, kitty! Samson? You in here? I have breakfast. . .or a late midnight snack. . .whatever. I have food."

Metal pelted the concrete, startling Maggie. She yelped, spinning toward the clatter. Her light revealed the mystery—a toppled tin of scattered nails.

Samson stretched and mewed while she recovered. He rubbed against her pajamas.

Maggie placed the cat food on the hood of the Suburban. As the opener circled the can, she tried not to scratch the paint. Pervasive canned liver quickly overcame all garage smells, and Samson jumped to attention beside her. She scratched his ear. "Watch your tongue on that sharp can," she warned as she left.

Picking her way home, she looked at the stars. *Well, Lord. Here we are. Just the two of us. Another Thanksgiving. Another time to be thankful. Sorry, God, I hadn't noticed.* She checked her watch by the moonlight. *Off schedule already!*

Hadn't God set her up in this crazy life? A Proverb came to mind. "*She looketh well to the ways of her household.*" *And her neighbors' household, and her in-laws, and the cat's meals.* Maggie tapped the flickering flashlight and chuckled. "'Her lamp goeth not out at night,'" she whispered.

She hoped God understood all she had on her plate. Make that *platter*.

She tiptoed back into the house, careful not to disturb the cousins littering the den floor that adjoined her kitchen. Cooking by candlelight wasn't romantic. *Stupid is more like it, but a sacrifice I'll gladly make to keep them all sleeping and "relatively" happy.* Preparing turkey in the dark was likely to result in a missing giblet or two, but if they came out in the dressing, she'd claim she meant to do it, and David would be pleased.

Contemplating the turkey in the sink, she placed one arm across her middle. The robe was still cold from her trek. *I need coffee. Bad.* She'd wanted to avoid waking the family with the aroma but decided to forget it. Who would wake at this hour of night?

"Morning," she whispered, correcting her internal monitor. *It's morning, and I have a turkey to dress and bake. Why have I wasted all this time on a stupid cat when I have a houseful of people expecting a meal it will take me hours to prepare and them minutes to eat?*

Maggie inhaled the cold thought. She hadn't considered how desperate she felt until she held the butcher knife over the turkey, ready to clip the plastic cord holding its wings. Standing alone in the candlelit kitchen, knife in hand. . .snoring relatives sprawled on the floor. Well, there was no telling what she might do—with the bird.