

# FIRESIDE

*by*  
Cate Culpepper



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## CHAPTER ONE

Mac coughed the last of the bus exhaust from her lungs and filled them with frigid air, the kind conjured by January nights in Virginia. Razor cold. She shifted the strap of her duffel out of what seemed a permanent groove in her shoulder, wincing as an ominous twinge went off in her lower back.

To pass the time as she walked, she mentally checked off her bitching points for the evening—excuses for self-pity, should she feel so inclined. Weary and hamstrung after four days on a Greyhound. Dressed too lightly—her denim jacket was scant protection from the frosty night. Ancient back injury still asserting itself. And she was probably lost.

Mac didn't care. After crossing the country sleeping under the steel canopy of a bus, she was ravenous for stars, and the night sky was glorious with them. Their faint light glittered off the white swells of snow blanketing the rural road. She kicked slowly through ankle-deep drifts, grateful for the fresh powder. This hike would be much less fun if the snow was hard packed. Thick trees studded either side of the road, and the scent of pine and spruce cleared her sinuses and revived her energies. The silver globe of a full moon was just cresting a forested ridge, adding its welcome illumination to her path.

That this was indeed a path of sorts, Mac was almost certain. She wedged two fingers into the hip pocket of her jeans, drew out a folded sheet, and snapped it open. The bus had dropped her

at its last stop, just outside Fredericksburg's city limits, and the shelter was supposed to be about a mile farther down this country road. The directions sketched in her neat script confirmed she was on the right path. As instructed, she had turned off the main road at the old billboard reading *Virginia Is For Lovers*—though someone had spray-painted out most of the words, in favor of a more succinct message—*Virginia Sucks*. In all fairness, Mac could not agree with this derogatory conclusion. Virginia suited her fine so far. She trudged on, enjoying the light crunch of her boots in the powder.

New Mexico had suited her fine too. So had Arizona. And Wyoming. And Colorado and Washington. Mac had greeted each of her new homes with optimism and hope, in the last fifteen years of her nomadic existence. She had found beauty to savor and friends to love, everywhere she went. She didn't doubt she would find those things here too.

But perhaps Virginia would be different. Maybe this time, her boots wouldn't start to hum after several months with the restless urge to move on. Maybe the loamy soil of a new state would finally prove deep and rich enough to allow her to take root.

Mac's step faltered and she turned her head, listening intently. She heard it again. There was no need to turn and look because there was nothing there. Mac looked back anyway. The path behind her was deserted and still, and there were no footprints save her own in the carpet of snow.

Whoever followed Mac still chose not to show himself. Or herself. She doubted now that they ever would—several years of coaxing and visiting quack spiritualists hadn't helped. These invisible footsteps had stalked her, off and on, as long as she could remember. It seemed her tiresome ghost had followed her even here, three thousand miles across the country.

Scowling, she defied her aching back and bent to scoop up a handful of snow. She balled it hard, then lobbed it back down the path. "Stop sneaking up on me," she snapped.

Then she straightened in surprise as her snowball careened off the very landmark the sheet of directions told her to watch for. A tasteful cedar sign bordered the side of the trail, marking an opening through the trees that would have been indistinguishable otherwise. Mac brushed dripping slush from the carved block lettering and FI—IDE became FIRESIDE.

Officially, the program was known as the Spillsbury County Transitional Shelter for Women and Children, but a confidential shelter couldn't trumpet its status on a roadside billboard, however secluded. Mac traced the grain of the wood, her fingers numb with cold. A fireside's benevolent image seemed more fitting. Faint gold light spilled around a bend in the narrow road ahead. No buildings were visible from here, but she'd found her way in.

Mac drew herself to her full height, in spite of loaded bag and aching back, and kicked through the drifts blocking the drive. She started up the steep incline, whistling, one hand jammed in her pocket to warm its stinging chill. It started to snow again, lightly, a dusting of lace.



*The woman was mad at her again. She could never figure out why the woman got so mad at her, but boy was she a big mean grouch. She threw that snowball right at her, and what if it had hit her? It could have hit her right in the eye! Not that it wouldn't have just passed right through her, but she would never throw a snowball at the woman, because she had good manners, unlike the woman. She stuck her tongue out at her again. A snowflake fell through her tongue, and that was fun. Then she realized the woman was disappearing up that little hill toward the light. She squeaked in dismay and hurried after her.*



The grounds revealed themselves to Mac slowly. First a long low building, angled off to her left, too distant and shadowed to offer much detail. Another far to Mac's right, a few meager lights burning behind curtained windows. The two buildings were like railroad cars forming the slanted sides of a triangle, a wide gap at its apex; but it was the house at the base of the triangle that drew Mac's eyes.

It was beautiful. She hadn't expected beautiful. She'd expected big, and it was that too. Beautiful and big. White columns, shingled roof, wooden shutters and two stories of *welcome*. Lord, this house glowed welcome like a beacon.

Smoke curled skyward from one of four narrow chimneys. The edge of the high roof was laced with strands of shining icicles. Mellow gold light bathed the worn cedar planks of the front porch.

Mac paused, panting slightly, and closed her eyes. She relaxed her shoulders and imagined herself another woman. A woman who'd just stepped from a taxi, perhaps, on a cold night like this, a sleeping toddler on one hip and a heavy suitcase weighting her arm. Mac looked at the house through that woman's eyes, close enough now to hear the soft music behind the wide front doors. *If I were that woman, I might hope healing could begin in such a place.*

But still she hesitated. Feathered snowflakes fell on Mac's eyelashes and she blinked them away, her weariness quieting the pleased wonder of this first greeting. She had knocked on so many doors for the first time, to a variety of welcomes, always hoping that the next door, in another house, a new city, would open to a more lasting peace.

Mac was thirty now, and she was getting tired. Her feet were cold and her back hurt. She had to trust that this house, and these women, would be gentle with her. She hitched her duffel higher and strode for the porch.

Fingers that had just pitched a snowball, Mac decided, should not then be asked to rap gloveless on an oak door. Mac sucked

her smarting knuckles while she waited, hoping Fireside would live up to its name; she could use an hour's thaw in front of a roaring hearth. The music continued inside, the Spring passage of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*.

Someone coughed within. Mac stilled her fist before it could knock a third time, hoping Vivian would answer. Vivian Childs, the program director of this outfit and now her supervisor, was the only staff member Mac had met in person. The warmth of Vivian's kilowatt smile would go far to ease the aches of long travel.

A small box two feet from Mac's ear exploded with static, and she flinched. It was an intercom, apparently, and it had just been coughed into. Mac pressed a hand to her heart.

"Yep," the box said. A woman's voice.

"Hello there," Mac said. "I'm Mac. You're expecting me, I think."

"Yep."

Long pause.

"Mac Laurie?" Mac tried again. "I left a message earlier, said I'd be in tonight. Vivian wasn't expecting me until tomorrow..."

Nothing. Mac stepped closer to the door and peered through the small glass oval she assumed was a peephole. She hoped the woman wouldn't cough again. The intercom made it sound like gunfire.

"All I see is an eyeball," the box said. "Reverse gears, please."

"Whoops." Mac backed up a step. She stared at the door full-face, then turned in a slow circle, and faced the door again. She jumped in spite of herself when the woman coughed.

"Mac Laurie," the box said. "You're the new shrink."

"Yep," Mac replied.

"Are you a smoking shrink?"

"I'm sorry?"

A heavy clank, and the door swung open. A black woman regarded Mac through a cloud of cigarette smoke, her fist perched

on one hip and one booted foot toed neatly over the other. “Are you a shrink who smokes?”

“Ah.” Mac smiled. “No. But I cohabitate comfortably with those who do.”

“A rare species.” The woman’s blunt nails ticked on the door’s edge as she eyed Mac up and down. She was husky, probably in her early forties, with ebony skin and keen eyes, her hair razored short. Her cigarette was clenched between strong white teeth, and laugh lines radiated around her full lips.

“Had to turn off the alarm thing.” The woman moved quickly for her size, and her wave was a brisk snap toward a stairway. “Bedrooms are upstairs. She’ll show you, hang on. Abby.” Cough, cough.

Then she was gone, rapid footfalls fading down the hall, a door closing with a slam of finality.

A resident? Mac didn’t think so. According to Vivian, clients’ units were in the two buildings out back. The main house contained offices and living space for staff. Therefore, Mac concluded, this smoking, snarling sentry was one of her new colleagues, her sister in social service. Mac remembered the laugh lines bracketing the woman’s mouth, and relaxed a little.

She followed her nose down the hall and through the arched entry her greeter had indicated. It opened to a cavernous, high-ceilinged living room. Mac stared. Her last three apartments hadn’t been this big.

She shrugged the duffel from her shoulder, wincing, and let it drop, the metal clasps clattering on the wood floor. She unzipped her jacket and rolled her shoulders, glad to be free of the dragging weight, then slid her hands in her back pockets.

Stepping down the two stairs leading into the room, Mac began a cautious walking tour. Big, she confirmed to herself. *Hello-ello-ello, bet it echoes in here.*

It might have been a gracious room once, and the cream walls and tall cherrywood bookcases still lent the space an air of hoop-skirted elegance. The slapdash furnishings were designed

more for comfort than style. That suited Mac. A long wraparound sofa gave the room a cozy air, as did the two sprung armchairs, a rocking chair, and frayed broadloom throw rugs, all probably culled from a variety of donors.

Mac's boot heels clicked slowly on the hardwood as she circled the room. Then she discovered two treasures and stopped short in delight. A grandfather clock's whispered ticking held reign in the shadows of one corner. And at the far end of the room was the largest fieldstone fireplace she'd ever seen. Mac thought she could stand erect in there, and she topped out just shy of six feet. The grate was piled high with fragrant logs awaiting a match.

"Marshmallows," Mac whispered, holding her hands to the dark hearth. "Weenie dogs. Toasting my slippers here to warm my toes..."

The fireplace explained the pleasant, lingering scent of wood smoke. Mac clasped her hands behind her and turned, smiling. She rocked on her heels, listening to the ticking clock and the Vivaldi drifting softly from another room. It wasn't too late, Granddad said it was just cresting ten. They could still light a fire. Mac might suggest it if Cough ever came back.

One of the side doors opened, and Mac stopped rocking abruptly. A woman backed through the swinging door, which apparently led to the kitchen. She was drying her hands on a white towel. She turned and regarded Mac with a polite smile.

The woman's face was too severe to be pretty, but light blue eyes softened her. So did hair the shade of honey curling to the nape of her neck. Her frame was fine-boned and slender, but the hands working the towel looked strong.

"I understand you're Mac." The woman's voice held the faintest British inflection, an alluring sound.

"Mac Laurie." She nodded. "I know Vivian lives in town, not on-site. She said if she couldn't be here, I should present myself to Abby."

"Abby Glenn, resident medic." The woman flipped the towel

over her shoulder, a graceful movement. “Have you met Cleo, our legal muscle?”

“I believe so. The woman who shrieked for you, that was Cleo?”

“The shrieker, yes.” Abby laughed softly and extended her hand. “We’re pleased to have you, Mac. We were lucky to find someone with your experience on short notice.”

Mac returned the formal handclasp, and Abby frowned down at her fingers.

“Was Cleo’s welcome that chilly? I meant to reach the door first, honestly.”

Mac grinned. “I walked here from the bus station. It’s a little brisk out.”

“Brisk? I wish you’d called for a ride. We could have spared you a cold hike.”

“I enjoyed the walk.” Mac shrugged. “It’s beautiful out here.”

“Well, that it is.” Abby smiled again, and Mac caught a light scent of apples as she moved past her. “We’ll have you warm soon. Cleo laid a fire this morning, and I’ve been looking forward to it all day. We’ve been brewing cider. It’ll be ready by the time you defrost.”

Mac savored the lilt in Abby’s voice as she followed her to the large screened grate before the hearth. Mac went to the other side to help lift, but Abby shook her head.

“Better not. These sidings are fairly heavy, and your back’s troubling you as it is. I can manage.”

Mac stared at Abby as she slid the hinged screen to one side. “You shook my hand and knew my back hurts?”

“I watched you move and knew your back hurts,” Abby corrected. Her smile turned shy. “I’m sorry, I’m showing off. I’ve been a doctor long enough to—”

She was interrupted by a loud metallic buzzing from the entry.

Abby sighed. “Not again.”

The kitchen door slapped open and Cleo emerged, crunching an apple. She jerked her chin at Mac. “She broke something and set off our alarm?”

“She’s innocent,” Abby said, “I’ve watched her every move.”

“Hokay.” Cleo speared the apple in her teeth and jogged toward the entry.

Abby turned back to Mac. “We’ve just installed a new alarm system, and there are bugs to work out. This is the second time it’s been triggered by ghosts, somehow.”

The strident buzzing cut off, and Mac’s awakened nerves tried to settle again.

“Hey? These are real specific ghosts.” Cleo came to the doorway, frowning. “The panel says a switch was thrown manually by someone in the east wing.”

“Hm.” Abby tapped her thighs. “This isn’t good. Ginny’s in East Four, and one of her children is diabetic. If she’s been careless with his meds again...”

“I’ll get coats.” Cleo disappeared down the hall.

“We need to check, Mac.” Abby moved to a door in the far wall and returned seconds later carrying a small satchel. “Please make yourself comfortable. We should be back soon.”

For a moment Mac was mightily tempted. She looked with longing toward the laid hearth and smelled the tantalizing spice of cider beginning to waft from the kitchen, and then she felt Cleo’s measuring gaze.

“I wanted a tour of the grounds.” Mac zipped her jacket shut. “Might as well start with the east wing.”

“Well, at least you’re already frozen.” Abby shrugged into the coat Cleo held ready for her. “You’re welcome to join us. Cleo, get a scarf, your cough is bad tonight.” She opened the front door as Cleo snagged a muffler from the closet.

“Abby, don’t lock it,” Cleo growled. “You lock us out again, Abigail, my right hand to God, Vivian will make you shimmy down the chimney—”

“Instead of letting Cleo break a window,” Abby told Mac as they stepped off the front porch. “Which set off the alarm the first time.”

“Ah.” Mac nodded.

Cold blasted Mac as they moved quickly out of the glow of the porch light—or as quickly as they could, wading through snow drifts—around the side of the house and into the darkness beyond. The wind rose, blowing the light snowfall into dizzying spirals.

Cleo broke ground for them, her short, powerful legs kicking a path clear toward the long building ahead. Hooded lights burned over the four apartment doors of the east wing, but they did little to push back the murk.

“The west and east wings both have four units, Mac.” Abby’s shoulders were hunched against the chill. “One, two, and three bedrooms. There’s space enough for fairly large families, as well as single women. We’re full most of the time, of course, though we have one vacancy now.”

“Can’t we brief her later?” Cleo was breathing hard, sending out clouds of vapor. “Show her a nice brochure or something?”

“The average stay is sixteen months,” Abby continued serenely, “but we can contract up to two years. We prioritize women from outside the county, whose abusers are so persistent they need to put plenty of space—”

“Abby, she’s going to quit in the morning anyway,” Cleo growled, putting out a quick hand to steady Abby when she slipped. “After you amputate her frostbitten feet.”

Mac trotted beside Abby, grinning. She liked Cleo.

Abby stepped up to the boarded walkway fronting the four east wing units. Mac glanced to her right, then stopped the other two with a low whistle. She waved them to her and spoke softly.

“The alarm might have been hit by a mother worried about a sick kid.” Mac lowered her voice another notch. “It might also have been thrown by that skinny man over there who’s trying to pry open a back window with a crowbar.”

Abby straightened. "A man? Where?"

"Hush, Abby." Cleo frowned at Mac. "What did you see?"

"There's a guy behind the first unit. I saw him as we stepped on the porch." Mac spoke calmly, but her heart punched in her chest. "He's jimmying the window with a crowbar. I didn't see any other weapons, but I only caught a glimpse." She touched Abby's arm. "Hold it, you can hear him."

The man's hoarse grunts were clearly audible, even over the growl of the wind. He was weeping.

Cleo threw a look down the stretch of doorways. "Degale and Waymon are in One. They're here. Everyone's in tonight, except Terry, in Three. She took her little girl to see her cousins. They're signed out till morning." She slapped at her pockets. "My damn cell, of course, is charging on my desk."

"All right." Abby rubbed her forehead. "Ideally, we'd get everyone out, but I don't want the kids milling around in this mess. They're better off behind locked doors, at least until we know what this man's up to. Agreed?"

"Yep," Cleo said. Mac nodded.

"Cleo, go back to the house and call the police."

Cleo glanced at Mac. "Abby—"

"We're off the 911 grid, Cleo. We haven't time to tell Mac where the phone is, much less how to direct them to us, if need be. Go on, now."

Cleo blew out air explosively. "Okay, but no heroics here." She pointed at Mac. "You try to impress this girl with some grandstand play and get her hurt in the process, newbie, I'll skewer you on a stick. You two be careful." She jumped off the porch and loped back toward the house, muffling a coughing fit in her scarf.

Mac cleared her throat. "Take my jacket, Abby. If you sneeze tomorrow, I'm a dead woman."

Abby pressed a hand to her mouth. "Please don't make me laugh now, I'm in the midst of my first prowler. If we botch this, Cleo will lord it over us forever. I'd just as soon both of us went

back with her, but we can't very well stroll off if this guy's trying to break in. We'll do what we can, all right?"

Mac nodded. "I'll follow your lead."

Abby drew a deep breath and stepped off the porch. She reached back and touched Mac as they approached the rear of the building, keeping well away from its corner. Mac stayed close behind her, in crisis mode now. She knew how to use an adrenaline rush.

Before she even saw the man, his muttering told her he was drunk. The rotgut fumes wafting toward them as they rounded the corner confirmed it. His language, what little Mac could understand through his slurring, told her he was enraged as well.

"Bitch lied. Right to my face. You lied right to my face..."

Abby stopped several yards from him and Mac took stock. There was a single arc lamp mounted high on a pole in the corner of the yard, but its stark illumination faded before reaching the end of the building. Mac saw well enough to know they might be in trouble.

The man was skinny but tall, and his long arms were wired with muscle. He was in shirtsleeves in this weather, further evidence of his state of mind. He knelt in two feet of snow, his chin covered with dark stubble, his eyes glowing red. Tears streaked his face, either from distress or cold. He gripped a long iron crowbar, trying to fit its forked end under a windowsill. He wasn't steady enough to hold his target, and the grate of steel jerking across wood set Mac's teeth on edge.

"You gonna talk to me, Terry!" The iron thudded back into the sill. He was blitzed, but still coherent. Mac wished he'd downed a few more shots; then they'd only have a sodden mumbler to deal with.

"Good evening," Abby called pleasantly. "My name is Abby, and I work here. I need to speak with you. Would you please put that iron down for a moment?"

The man hardly registered their presence, turning his head briefly before focusing again on the window. "Bitch lied. Walked

out. Walked fucking out. I told her I'd kick her ass she do me like that..."

"Terry isn't here." Abby held her medical bag loose at her side, and Mac wondered if there was anything in it heavy enough to make a decent club. "Do you understand me? Terry's not here, but if you'll put the iron down, we'll try to help you."

"Screwed me up!" The man swept the bar in a sharp arc toward them, and Mac and Abby stepped back in tandem. The bar never came close, but the momentum of the swing knocked the man off balance. He smacked back against the building and sat sprawled in the snow. "Screwed me up," he roared again.

"Then don't get screwed now." Mac mirrored Abby's conversational tone. She kept her voice kind but firm. She moved a few cautious steps sideways, into the man's field of vision. "You'll be screwed again if you're arrested for breaking that window. You'll have to find some other way to handle this."

He blinked at Mac, panting.

Mac thrust her hands in her pockets. "If you break that window, the cops will cart you off to jail. You can't see Terry and your little girl if they lock you up. You need to see them, right?"

She caught Abby's slight nod out of the corner of her eye, and returned it. Willing her shoulders to relax, Mac waited until Abby stepped quietly into the shadow of the building. All they needed was time.

"Lied to me, I'm gonna break her head."

"It's lousy she lied, but you know this won't work." Mac eyed the bar still clenched in the man's hand and kept her distance, but his eyes were focusing now. He was listening. "It's freezing out here, man. You don't have any gloves. Your hands have to be killing you."

"Cold," the man moaned. He scrubbed his free arm across his face. "Bitch won't listen. I told her a hunnerd times, I told her I wouldn't do nothing. She don't listen. She took my kid."

"Terry's not here now, but I'll see her tomorrow." Mac lifted her chin. "You want me to talk to her for you, Jim?"

“Jim?” The intruder blinked at Mac. “Thass not my name. Ray’s my name. She don’t listen. She got law. Fuckin’ cops.” Tears coursed down his ravaged face, but he remained seated, and the bar stayed on the ground by his side. “Fuckin cops gimme papers.”

Mac’s gaze darted to Abby. Great, at least there was a restraining order on this guy. “What do the papers say about your daughter, Ray?” She slapped her pockets. “Damn, I forgot my smokes. You have any smokes, Ray?”

“Ain’t got nothing. Ain’t got no woman. Ain’t got no kid.”

Ain’t got no crowbar, Mac thought. Ray dropped it in the snow to rub his face with both hands. She took a slow step forward and hunkered down on her heels, her hands dangling between her knees. She could still move quickly in this position, but her relaxed stance made her look harmless. Her voice became a low drawl. “You know Terry better than me. What do you want me to tell her tomorrow?”

“You tell her to talk to me!” he bawled. “She took my kid. Cops gimme papers. I come home, she’s gone. No one say where. Shit, I ask ’em. Took my kid. I couldn’t find nothing. I got nothing, but I told her I break her head, she run from me.”

Easily the dullest conversation Mac had had in months, but at least it was two-way now. She wanted to keep him talking, to turn him toward function and away from feeling when she could. Her back was killing her, but she wasn’t about to sit in the slush with this guy; it would be too hard to get up fast, and her height might seem threatening if she towered over him. He wasn’t processing anything she said, but he was talking, responding, and the iron stayed on the ground at his side.

Mac saw the first flash of blue and red light splash across the ground. The police had followed procedure for a silent approach. She tensed to rise quickly if she had to, but either the wind covered the sound of the patrol car, or the man was far enough gone to be indifferent. “We can tell them you stopped when we asked you to,” Mac told him. “You be cool, Ray, and we’ll tell them that.”

“I dint do nothing.”

Mac sighed, then looked up sharply at the sound of a new voice.

“The cops are here, Abby!”

A thin woman leaned against the far corner of the building, hidden in shadow. The man’s head twisted toward her.

“Gonna talk to you, Ter—”

Damn, Mac thought.

The man was scrabbling to his feet so she rose too, keenly aware of the crowbar. He left it on the ground. She heard Abby’s indrawn breath somewhere near and the man was sliding, flailing in the snow as he tried to stand erect. Mac took his arm, either to restrain him or steady him, trying to distract his fixed attention from the woman at the far corner.

The clinical part of Mac’s mind registered that he didn’t attack her, that the push was instinctive, he just wanted her out of the way. She would have recognized deliberate violence, she’d known it before, but then the difference was academic, because both his huge hands were on her chest, and he gave one powerful shove.

Mac was airborne and then she landed, slam, flat on her back in the snow. She slid a good ten feet before coming to rest, snow gritting beneath the collar of her jacket.

There was a thwacking sound, and a guttural groan. Mac thought of Abby, and alarm sluiced through her. She lifted her head and saw the man huddled on his side against the wall, his hands cupping his groin, and Abby just lowering her boot.

Then there was a blur of navy blue windbreakers and shouting, and Mac heard a child crying. Cleo was back, and the two officers with her were doing a dandy job of cuffing the guy, so Mac rested her head in the snow again and looked up into the trees.

“Maybe Virginia does suck,” she mumbled.

“What was that?” Abby crouched beside her. “Mac, how are you?”

“I’m fine. He didn’t hurt me.”

“You’re sure? How’s your back?”

“Stiff,” Mac admitted. She tried a tentative flex. “But nothing’s newly wrenched.”

“All right, then. Grab an arm. Carefully, please.”

Mac took hold of Abby’s braced forearm and climbed to her feet. Her back griped but it didn’t scream. She was okay. Abby patted her down thoroughly, brushing off clumps of wet snow. She was Mac’s hero in that moment, this diminutive doctor and her flashing boot.

“Thanks, Doc,” Mac said.

Abby’s face lost its grim cast and she smiled up at her. “Think nothing of it, Counselor.”

“Well? Well? Well?” Cleo was plowing toward them, and it seemed the only word she could bark in her urgency. She gripped their arms.

“We’re fine, Cleo,” Abby assured her. “You dropped your scarf,” she added.

“Anyone hurt over there?” Both police officers knelt by the man huddled on the ground, and one trained a flashlight on their faces.

“We’re okay.” Mac nodded at their captive, who was groaning softly, his face in the snow. “How about him?”

“He’ll be frisky again in a few hours.” The cop snapped off his flashlight and slid it into his belt. “Looks like he got kicked in an anatomically sensitive location.”

“I am a doctor,” Abby said. “Thanks for coming so quickly, gentlemen.”

“Our dispatch said we got a real rude summons from y’all.” The other officer rose and adjusted the bill of his cap, grinning. “Some shrieking harpy called in something like, ‘Get your ass out here now now now,’ screamed over and over.”

“It worked.” Cleo pulled a sheaf of papers out of her pocket and passed them to him. “Here’s a copy of his wife’s restraining order.”

They watched the two officers lift the dazed man from the snow and half carry him to the patrol car parked yards away.

“Well, ladies, we got a clipboard to fill out.” The cop looked at Cleo. “Want to do the honors?”

“Sure, I can give you the basics.” Cleo wrapped her jacket tighter around her waist, but not before Mac saw the gleaming grip of a handgun lodged in the belt of her jeans. “Abby, you and the newbie want to do something about our breathless audience over there?”

Mac turned and saw a huddled group standing in the shadows at the far end of the building, three women and assorted kids. The revolving dome light of the cruiser reached them faintly, highlighting their fixed stares.

“Oh Lord,” Abby murmured, then slipped her arm through Mac’s. “You did ask for a tour, Mac. Care to meet a few of our guests?”

“I’d be pleased.” Mac’s pulse had resumed a bearable rhythm, and she figured she could make a suitably composed first impression. She braced herself to absorb a fusillade of new names and faces.

They kicked through the snow to the back of the far apartment, and the group loosened and straggled as they approached. Mac sidestepped two kids tumbling in the slush and turned to meet an explosion of babble.

“Who was it? Was it Benny? It didn’t look like Benny.” A small woman had one toddler perched on her hip, and another clenched her hand.

“It wasn’t Benny, Ginny, and he’s been taken care of nicely.” Abby’s tone was soothing. “Apparently, he’s Terry’s husband.”

“She’s not here, but okay, how did he find us? This place is supposed to be secret, you said, so how did he find us? Did someone tell him where—”

“Lordy, Ginny, can’t you cork it?” The black woman next to Ginny grinned at Abby. “These girls handled him fine.”

Abby tapped the baseball bat perched on the woman’s broad

shoulder. “Degale, dear, pray tell, what were you planning to do with that?”

“I was planning to whap a skinny white man upside the head,” Degale said. “If Legs here couldn’t sweet-talk him out of busting my window.” She turned friendly eyes on Mac. “She did pretty good, though. I didn’t get to.”

“That she did,” Abby said. “This is Mac Laurie, ladies. She’s our new counselor.”

Degale enfolded Mac’s cold fingers in her large palm. “Nice to meet you, Mac Laurie.”

“Same to you, Degale.” Mac shook her hand.

“Where you hail from, Mac?”

“New Mexico and points west.”

“They stack ’em high in New Mexico,” Degale observed.

“That they do.” Mac smiled.

“And this is Ginny and her two youngest,” Abby went on. “And back there is Jo.”

“Hell, Abby, don’t point me out.” The hunched woman in the back came forward, scowling. Her brown eyes darted a side look at Mac. “Yeah, hi, I’m the asshole who sounded off. You had that creep all peaceful until I piped up. He thought I was Terry, ho, she’d be so insulted. Me and Tina heard him outside. I’m the one who hit the alarm. You hate me now, already.”

“Why?” Mac asked. “For backing us up when you could have stayed safe and toasty inside? Pleased to meet you, Jo.”

“But how’d he find us?” Ginny still sounded shrill, and the child in her arms squirmed and whined.

“It’s a good question, Ginny, and we need to find out.” Abby gave her wrist a reassuring pat. “The police will question him, and we’ll fill you all in on whatever we hear. For now, what do you say we get in out of this cold? Half of these kids don’t have jackets.”

But one of those kids wound strong little arms around Mac’s leg with a gleeful howl.

“Hey, bucko, you’re going to dump me on my kiester again.”

Mac hopped to keep her balance, then lifted the boy into her arms.

“Son, you introduce yourself,” Degale said.

“Waymon!” the boy shouted. “I got a truck!”

“Waymon’s got a truck,” Mac said. She smiled at his doe-soft eyes and pudgy cheeks. “I’m in love,” she told Degale.

“Four years old, and he’s got females falling at his tennies.” Degale held out her hand. “You come with your grandma, little man, ’fore her feet freeze solid.”

“Feet,” Waymon repeated. “I got a truck.” He slithered down Mac and jumped to grab his grandmother’s fingers.

“So you’re gonna tell us what happened?” Ginny asked Abby softly. “As soon as you know?”

“Just as soon as we know,” Abby said. “Come on, let’s round up the kids. It’s way past their bedtime. I’ll come with you and help get them settled.”

“Tina and I will take care of her, Abby.” Jo picked up the little girl clinging to Ginny’s hand. “Tina will pour some cocoa down her, and we’ll sit with her awhile. We’ll be fine. You guys put in a long night already. Don’t worry about us.”

“Thanks, Jo.” Mac laid her hand on Waymon’s head. “Can I meet Tina in the morning?”

“We’re in Two.” Jo smiled. “And we’re sleeping in, I warn you now.”

“Good night, women.” Abby steered a stray child after Ginny and Jo.

“Abby?” Degale turned back to them, Waymon curled on one arm. She lifted the bat slightly. “We wouldn’t have let him mess with you two, honey.”

Abby nodded. “Good rest, dear.”

Mac lowered her voice. “Should we do a quick walk-through? These guys look fine, but others inside might be pretty shook.”

Abby smiled. “Good idea, Counselor.”

What they found pleased Mac. Women were gathering into

small groups in a few of the units, and she heard spatters of the kind of raucous, relieved laughter that follows a crisis settled without bloodshed. Fireside's residents turned to each other for support, as well as staff, and that spoke well for the diverse culture of the house. Abby and Cleo had established an atmosphere of mutual respect and caring that didn't always exist in the stressful climate of shelters.

When Mac and Abby emerged from the last unit, Cleo and the policeman were putting final touches on the incident report. Mac snuck a quick look inside the cruiser, which still pulsed blue and red light across the dark, snowy yard. Terry's husband appeared to have passed out in the backseat, but the other cop kept a wary eye on him from behind the wheel.

The cruiser pulled out, and they tromped back to the house, silent now in the buzz of post-crisis nerves. They gained the front porch and Abby reached for the door latch.

Locked.

"I've done it again," Abby said to the door. "I've done it again," she said to Cleo. She leaned her forehead against the door and sagged. "I do not bloody believe this..."

Cleo smiled smugly and twirled a ring of keys behind Abby's back, and Mac hooted. Cleo reached up and tousled Mac's dark hair.

"Welcome to Fireside, Counselor."