

# Shelter

First Response Series

**Claire Boston**



First published by Bantilly Publishing in 2019

Copyright © Claire Boston 2019

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All rights reserved. This publication (or any part of it) may not be reproduced or transmitted, copied, stored, distributed or otherwise made available by any person or, in any form (electronic, digital, optical, mechanical) or by any means (photocopying, recording, scanning or otherwise) without prior written permission from the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Shelter: First Response Series

EPUB format: 978-1-925696-34-9

Mobi format: 78-1-925696-35-6

Print: 978-1-925696-36-3

Large Print: 978-1-925696-37-0

Cover design by Amygdala Design

Edited by Ann Harth

Proofread by Teena Raffa-Mulligan

## DEDICATION

To all the volunteer fire and rescue crews out there who  
give up their time in order to protect and save the  
community.  
Thank you.

## Prologue

Jeremy Mendelson cut the last leg for his new desk and switched off the table saw, the high-pitched buzz fading in the night. He lifted his safety glasses onto his head, brushing his hair off his face and studied his design. Not particularly inspiring. It seemed pointless to make an office desk when he had his whole house to himself and could use the kitchen table.

The scent of smoke tickled his nose. He checked the floor and bench, but nothing was smouldering.

He sniffed again, the smell stronger this time and more acrid. Not a neighbour's log fire, but more the stench he associated with a house burning down.

His stomach clenched as he strode to the entrance of his shed and scanned his property. His porch light was a beacon against the heavy clouds obscuring the moon and stars. He shifted his gaze higher, above the trees marking his property border, and his pulse skyrocketed. An unmistakable glow. Fire. Too big to be his neighbour with a simple bonfire and far too late at night.

He grabbed his phone from his pocket, dialled triple zero as he left his shed and ran across the yard to his house. "I've got a fire on my neighbour's property,

## SHELTER

about ten kilometres east of Blackbridge, Western Australia.” He gave the address as he raced into his bedroom, tripping over the boots he’d left on the floor. Where was his gear? Flung over the chair in the corner where he’d left it the last time he’d washed it.

He pulled on his pants while holding the phone between his chin and his shoulder. It dropped to the ground and he threw on his shirt before picking it up. “What was that?”

“What can you see?”

He strode into his living room. “Just a bright glow from here.” His bulldog, Fetch was curled up snoring, his head hanging off his bed. He’d be fine. The fire wouldn’t spread, they’d had a lot of rain in the past week.

Keys. Where were his keys? He scanned the piles of papers and models on the table, the clutter on the kitchen bench and finally saw them in the bowl by the door. For once he’d left them where he was supposed to. On his way out, his fingers brushed the frame containing a photo of him and his dad on a fishing trip. “Focus,” he murmured and headed out to his ute.

“Is anyone inside?” the dispatcher asked.

“I don’t know.” He hoped not.

The drive to his neighbour’s property took only a minute and as he pulled in, he swore. A lot of people milled outside the burning building, staring at the flames, a couple gesturing frantically. “It’s an outbuilding, well alight. If anyone’s inside, there’s not much time to get them out.” He parked at a safe distance and ran to the migrant workers. “Anyone inside?”

One Asian man yelled at him in another language and pointed, gesturing frantically. Not helpful.

Where was Henk? Jeremy scanned the area until he

spotted him. Henk stood apart from his workers, yelling to another man. Didn't he have a garden hose anywhere? Jeremy checked the outside of the building as he strode to him.

"Anyone inside?"

Henk jolted. "Jeremy, thank God you're here. I didn't hear the sirens." He glanced behind Jeremy and frowned.

"They're still en route. Is everyone accounted for?"

He shook his head. "No. Annisa is still inside."

Jeremy swore and told the operator, then asked, "Where would she be?"

"Probably her room – back, right-hand corner."

Of course it fucking was. The furthest away and closest to the fiercest flames. No sirens yet. "What's the layout? Doors open or closed?"

"Long corridor runs down the middle of both floors with rooms on either side. I think the fire started in the kitchen at the far end of the corridor. Ask the workers about the doors."

Jeremy threw his phone to Henk. "Update dispatch." He ran back to the group of Asian men. "Did you leave the doors inside open or closed?" Annisa might have gone into one of the rooms and become disoriented.

The men stared at him and one said, "*Annisa di dalam.*"

Shit. That sounded like Indonesian. "*Bicara bahasa Indonesia?*"

"*Melayu.*"

Close enough. He repeated the question in Indonesian.

"*Buka.*"

Open. It meant the ventilation would feed the fire, but also prevent a build-up of gases that could cause a

backdraft. The flames were already at the main door. Foolish to go that way without a breathing apparatus and a water hose.

Jeremy grabbed the ladder and a hammer from his work ute. He pointed to the man. "Hold the ladder," he said in Indonesian. To the rest he said, "Move back," and gestured.

They did as he asked.

"That window?" he yelled at Henk over the crackle of the fire and pointed.

"Yeah."

In the distance, sirens wailed but not close enough. The extra minutes could be the difference between life and death. He had to go. No one else would die on his watch. Pain washed through him and he gritted his teeth. Focus.

He shoved the hammer into a pocket and leaned the ladder up beside the window. "Hold it," he barked, pounding the sides of the ladder. The worker nodded and steadied the ladder.

He ignored the nerves humming in his stomach and climbed. No light inside from the fire, so he switched on the torch on his helmet and scanned the room. Empty. Damn it.

"Annisa!" The roar of the fire swallowed his words.

The window was open a crack, but didn't budge when he tried to widen it. Locked. At least there wasn't any smoke up here yet. He checked over his shoulder as he pulled out his hammer. No flashing lights. He had to go in. Lowering his helmet shield and leaning away from the window, he smashed it.

No backdraft.

Thank God. "Annisa!" He ran the hammer handle around the window frame, smashing as much glass as he could, and climbed through, testing the floor before

he put any real weight on it.

It held.

An unmade single bed, a storage box against one wall and no room for anything else. He checked under the bed. Clear.

Shit.

Going further into a burning building with no means to communicate with the people outside was straight up stupid.

He scrambled across the floor to the door and peered outside. “Annisa?” he yelled. Smoke gathered on the ceiling, blocking the torchlight.

Something, maybe a sob, to the left. “Annisa, if you can hear me, yell out.”

“*Tolong!*”

Indonesian again. “*Kembali ke kamarmu.*” As he spoke, he crawled towards her voice, keeping the wall on his left. He coughed, moving faster. The smoke could be deadlier than the flame. “Annisa.”

A dark shape in front of him took form. Annisa huddled at the top of the stairs, her eyes wide, body shaking. She sobbed something but he didn’t understand. Black smoke billowed up the stairs, and he turned his head, blinking his eyes. Too thick. Too easy to get lost down there. Better to go back.

His eyes watered and his lungs burned. “This way.” He tugged her arm, gestured for her to follow him.

She shook her head, wrenched her arm away.

“*Cara ini, silakan.*”

When he got out of here, he’d practise his Indonesian.

She didn’t budge.

He didn’t have time to wait. His head already spun from the smoke. “Don’t panic.” He crouched down and hefted her over his shoulder. She weighed next to

nothing. She shrieked and hit him, but he held her legs tight against his chest and double-timed it back to the room at the end. As he burst through the doorway, a masked face was at the window.

Lawrence.

Annisa stopped struggling as he passed her out the window to his fire captain. The floorboards under his feet bowed. "Move!"

Lawrence was already in motion, shimmying down the ladder. Jeremy lunged for the window sill to haul his arse out as the floor gave way.

The crack of disintegrating wood and a roar of flames with a huge burst of smoke and heat. He hung from the window sill, not daring to peer down at the inferno beneath his feet. He felt it fine.

Broken glass dug through his gloves and he hissed as he struggled to pull himself up.

Chin ups were also going on his to-do list.

Muscles straining, head spinning, he scrambled for better purchase and got his arms over the sill, his thick jacket protecting him from the broken glass. Strong arms dragged him further over and then the person lugged him over his shoulder and carried him down the ladder. He was dumped unceremoniously next to the ambulance.

"Anyone else inside?" Nicholas asked.

Jeremy coughed, shaking his head, sucking in deep breaths of fresh air. "Not that I know of."

Guy, one of the paramedics, pushed him back so he sat on the edge of the ambulance. Annisa lay inside on the bed, being attended to by Cynthia. Guy handed him an oxygen mask, and Jeremy put it on as he took stock of the situation.

Several team members hosed the flames, and the fire hissed in protest.

“Any injuries?” Guy asked.

Jeremy’s throat and eyes burned and his hands hurt like a mother-fucker. Shards of glass stuck out of his gloves.

Guy swore. “Let me check that.”

Jeremy gritted his teeth as Guy pulled the glass out and then slid the gloves off. A couple of gashes in his left hand were bleeding.

“You might need stitches,” Guy said as he cleaned the cuts.

Jeremy grimaced. He had a full schedule of work next week.

“How’s your breathing?”

Lifting the mask away from his face, he croaked, “Throat hurts, so do eyes.”

“We’ll rinse out your eyes in a minute.” Guy bandaged his hand as Lawrence walked over.

“Is he all right?”

Guy nodded. “They both need a proper examination at the hospital, but there’s nothing life-threatening.”

“Good.” He turned back to Jeremy. “What the fuck do you think you were doing?”

Jeremy shrugged. “There wasn’t time to wait.”

“Bullshit. Instead of hauling one person out of the house, we had to haul two.”

“The top floor gave way.”

Lawrence grunted, unimpressed. “I’ll check on you when this is out.” He walked away.

“That sounded like a threat.” Guy laughed.

Jeremy shrugged. Yeah. He’d get reamed. But at least the woman had survived.

“You ready to go?” Guy asked Cynthia.

“When you are.”

“Come on, Jeremy. Let’s get you into the ambo and strapped in.”

## SHELTER

As Jeremy stood, dizziness washed over him. He swayed and put his hands out for balance. Guy steadied him. "Take it easy, mate." With an arm under Jeremy's elbow, Guy helped him into the vehicle.

As he was strapped in, Jeremy glanced out the door. Everything was under control.

"Ready?" Guy asked.

Jeremy nodded. Annisa was strapped onto the bed and she gave him a small smile.

That one smile made all the shit jobs Lawrence would give him worth it. He grinned at her.

"Wait for me." Henk climbed into the ambulance. "I can't have my worker going to hospital alone."

Annisa's eyes widened, fear crossing them.

Jeremy frowned. Henk could be a jerk, but why was she scared of him?

His gut clenched. Something wasn't right.

He'd keep a close eye on Annisa and make sure she was fine.

## **Want to read more?**

To buy go to

<https://www.claireboston.com/shelter/>