

Shield

First Response Series #2

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DEDICATION

To all State Emergency Services personnel who give up
their time to help others. Thank you.

Chapter 1

Jamie Zanetti scanned the bush for signs of the missing boy.

To his left, other State Emergency Service volunteers called Noah's name, their bright orange clothes visible through the straggly gum trees. To his right was more bush. His black steel-capped boots crunched over the damp native grasses.

How far could a four-year-old walk in a few hours? They didn't have enough volunteers to cover the whole national park. The winery had disappeared from sight a long time ago and he couldn't even hear the sound of cars along the highway. At least the ground was relatively flat and it was too cold for the dugites and tiger snakes to be active. The sun sank closer to the horizon, the temperature dropping. It would be dark soon and that would be terrifying for a young kid. Thick grey clouds threatened to make the day even more miserable by dropping rain.

Christ, he hoped they found Noah soon—alive.

Jamie had been back in Blackbridge for six months, and in that time he'd been on far too many searches for missing people. Sometimes they found them alive with only minor injuries, sometimes they didn't. But this

time it was a kid. Jamie visualised the photo they'd been shown—wide brown eyes and a cheeky grin. Noah had been wearing a green rain jacket and black jeans, so would blend with the surrounding bush.

Jamie cupped his hands around his mouth. "Noah!" He waited. Only the echo of other searchers calling the boy.

Jamie moved more to the right, still able to see his fellow volunteer, Elijah Johnson, but widening the area of the search. If he were four, what would he do?

He sighed. As soon as he realised he was lost, he would have sat down and waited for someone to find him. His parents had drilled that into him. But that had been *after* he'd decided to visit his friend Kit by himself. Kit had a new puppy and he'd wanted to play with it.

Jamie glanced around. What would have caught Noah's attention? Had he followed something—a bird or a kangaroo? Yeah, he could imagine him running into the bush after an interesting animal, especially because the child was English. Most of Australia's animals would be unusual to him. Perhaps he'd wandered further and further away until he'd lost sight of whatever he was following and then realised he didn't know his way back.

"Noah!"

A sound. A sob?

Jamie froze, straining to hear. "Noah, is that you?" He stepped towards the noise.

A quiet cough, or maybe a hiccough reached him.

Jamie's heart raced as he yelled to Elijah, "Over here." He strode towards the sound. "Wave your arms for me, Noah, so I can find you."

The boy wailed and Jamie pinpointed him sitting next to a tree, his cheeks tear- and dirt-streaked. Relief made him dizzy. "I've found him!" He crashed through

the bush. As he reached the boy, his ankle rolled on a rock and he dropped to his knees, pain coursing through him.

Shit.

Noah recoiled.

Jamie gritted back the pain and smiled at the sobbing young boy. “Hey, kiddo. My name’s Jamie. I’m with the SES. We’ve been searching for you.”

“I want my Dad!” The boy shook, hugging himself.

Jamie glanced up. The other volunteers were coming. “He’s on his way. He’s been so worried about you.”

Noah bit his lip. “Am I in trouble?”

“Nah. Your parents will be happy to have you back.”

Footsteps as Elijah approached. Jamie squeezed the boy’s hand and then other members of the Blackbridge SES converged on them. Elijah’s wide smile made Jamie’s heart stutter. “Hey, Noah. Glad we found you.”

Their section leader, Morgan spoke into his radio. “We’ve found him.”

“Noah!” The frantic call of the boy’s father as he pushed through the volunteers.

“Dad!” Noah flung himself at his father who picked him up and held him tight, his eyes closed.

“You’re all right.” The man’s voice shook. “Are you hurt?” He examined his son and then hugged him again. “You scared me to death. Don’t ever do that again.”

The boy buried his head into his father’s shoulder and mumbled sorry amidst his cries.

Jamie’s heart clenched and he blinked his watery eyes. Reunions like this were the best possible outcome. He swallowed hard and quietly cleared his throat. Elijah squeezed his shoulder and smiled. No judgement.

“It’s OK. You’re safe. I’ve got you.” The father dried Noah’s tears and kissed his cheek. “Why did you wander off?”

“I saw a kangaroo.”

His father sighed and glanced at Jamie. “Thank you. Thank all of you.”

Morgan nodded. “We’re glad he’s safe. Let’s get him back to the winery. There’s an ambulance there to check him.” He led the way.

Jamie rotated his ankle and hissed at the fresh pain shooting up his leg. Damn it.

“Need help?” Elijah held out his hand.

They wore identical orange uniforms, but somehow, Elijah wore his with style. His French-tucked shirt drew Jamie’s eye to his belt and made him imagine what lay beneath it. He met Elijah’s deep green eyes, and hesitated. He’d been avoiding Elijah since he’d moved back, fighting his attraction. But who was he kidding? If he could choose anyone to rescue him, it would be Elijah. “I twisted my ankle.”

Concern crossed Elijah’s face and he squatted. “How bad is it?”

“Not sure if I can put any weight on it.”

Elijah clucked his tongue and examined Jamie’s foot, his touch light. “All right, honey. Let’s get your shoe off and then I can help you back.” He worked quickly on the laces of Jamie’s boot and gently pulled it off.

Jamie gritted his teeth at the pain.

Elijah called to one of the other volunteers, holding up the boot. “Can you carry this?”

“What happened?” Brenton asked.

“Twisted it,” Jamie said, taking hold of Elijah’s hand and bracing his good foot on the ground as Elijah lifted him. Fresh-smelling aftershave tickled Jamie’s nose and the firm arm around Jamie’s waist revealed the strength

below Elijah's slim build. A bolt of desire replaced Jamie's pain.

"I'll tell Siobhan." Brenton walked off. Jamie barely heard him.

Giving in to his attraction to Elijah would complicate his life and the very thought of it made his throat tighten and his pulse race. He swallowed. Don't think about it. He had to get back and have his ankle assessed.

Elijah tucked his shoulder under Jamie's arm, his head so close. "Is this all right?"

It was too nice. Jamie nodded, unable to stop his quick smile in response.

"OK, hop with me."

Jamie was forced to use Elijah's strong body as a crutch, leaning on him every time he hopped. It wasn't how Jamie had imagined having Elijah's body rubbing against his.

"What did you do?" Siobhan, their team leader walked over to them, her bright blue hair clashing with her orange uniform.

"Twisted my ankle."

"Let me help." She wrapped her arm around Jamie's waist on his other side, her body softer and curvier. He blocked the memory of running his hands over her breasts when they'd been in high school. Such a long time ago. He was no longer attracted to her, though she would be the easier choice. No one would bat an eyelid if they dated.

Elijah squeezed Jamie's waist as he tripped, and the flush of desire swept through him again.

OK, so no. Ignoring Elijah wouldn't work.

But he'd think about it later, when he was away from Elijah, when he could think clearly.

Right now, he needed to get back to base.

And it was a long way back to the winery.

The first drop of rain hit the back of his hand. The clouds were full to bursting. Another drop of rain, and then another.

He sighed. What a day.

“What made you move to Blackbridge, Elijah? I don’t reckon it was the weather.” Siobhan’s voice startled Jamie out of his thoughts.

“My parents live here,” Elijah said.

“Elijah went to the agricultural college,” Jamie added. “He was in our year.” He’d first met Elijah at Kit’s sixteenth birthday party. That had been a revelation. Elijah had been a little awkward-looking, all arms and legs, but he was already out and proud. The first gay person Jamie had met. “Is that when they moved here?”

Elijah shook his head. “It was after I graduated. They fell in love with the town when they came to pick me up from boarding school, but it took a couple of years for Dad to find a job.”

“And you work for Kit van Ross?” Siobhan said.

“Kit Zanetti,” Jamie and Elijah corrected at the same time. They grinned at each other. Kit had married Jamie’s brother recently and had happily discarded her maiden name. She wanted the world to know Lincoln was hers.

“Yeah,” Elijah continued. “She needed a new farmhand just after I moved back. It was perfect timing.”

From all reports, Elijah had fitted in perfectly. Kit didn’t suffer fools and she was passionate about her farm, so if Elijah hadn’t pulled his weight, she would have fired him by now—friend or not. Instead she was always talking about how great Elijah was which made it harder for Jamie to pretend he thought of Elijah as

just an acquaintance. He'd stopped himself from asking how Elijah was at their weekly family dinners, but luckily Elijah featured regularly in Kit's stories about the farm.

"How's the ankle?" Elijah asked as they stopped to rest.

"Throbbing." Jamie leaned against a gum tree to get his breath back. They were maybe halfway to the winery and the other volunteers had long since outpaced them, eager to get back before the spits of rain turned into a downpour.

Elijah smirked. "Title of your sex tape?"

Jamie laughed. "You watch that show too?"

"It's one of my favourites."

"What are you two talking about?" Siobhan frowned.

"A show on Netflix," Jamie told her. "It's a cop sitcom where the running gag is—" At her bored expression he said, "Never mind."

Elijah placed his arm around Jamie's waist again. "Let's keep moving."

Jamie leaned against him as Siobhan took his other side.

"I've convinced Adam he has to watch it," Elijah said. "You should join us."

"Sounds like fun." With Elijah's roommate there as chaperone, Jamie wouldn't have to worry about how Elijah made him feel.

Siobhan laughed. "Don't tell people you're going to Elijah's to Netflix and chill or they might get the wrong idea."

"No, they won't." Jamie's denial came out a little more forcefully than he meant. His face flamed and he avoided looking at Elijah. "No one thinks Adam and Elijah are partners."

SHIELD

Elijah's fingers tightened on his hip for a second before releasing. He winced. He'd sent the wrong message. Maybe he should say he didn't care, that he was bi, but only his family and closest friends knew. That was part of the problem.

His injured foot brushed the ground and pain pierced him. He'd deal with his attraction to Elijah later.

He checked where they were.

Not too far to go.

This was definitely not how Elijah had imagined getting his hands on Jamie Zanetti, but it was a good start. They matched each other's height and Jamie's body rubbed against him with each hop, warming him in more ways than one. Elijah was tempted to go slow, but Jamie's ankle must hurt and it was getting dark. The only problem was Jamie's adamant rejection of Siobhan's statement—as if being accused of being gay was a bad thing. Elijah could have sworn some of Jamie's comments over the past few months had been flirty.

When they finally left the forest and ducked through the fencing into the Vale winery, the only light was from the tower illuminating the car park, and those shining in the windows of the restaurant. The bulk of the rain had held off, spitting regularly, but not showering. Noah, rugged up with a blanket across his shoulders, sat snuggled on his mother's lap in the ambulance, his eyes closed, contentment on his face, while his father chatted to the paramedics and the police. The SES crew packed away their equipment and Elijah's roommate, Constable Adam Marshall spoke to Morgan.

"It's the ambulance for you," Siobhan said to Jamie.

They moved past the playground from where Noah had disappeared, and as if by magic, the fairy lights switched on around the garden. Pretty. As they reached the ambulance, Sergeant Lincoln Zanetti looked up. “What have you done?”

Jamie shrugged. “Twisted my ankle.”

“Idiot.”

Elijah grinned. Brotherly love at its finest. He helped Jamie to sit and stepped back while the paramedic, Guy, examined him.

“I’m going to take your sock off,” Guy said. “It might hurt.”

Jamie nodded.

Elijah clenched his fists to resist reaching out to Jamie when he winced. Instead he said, “I’ll report to Morgan.”

He hadn’t quite figured out his section leader. Whenever Morgan spoke to him, he was brusque and kind of distracted. He reminded Elijah of his father—a man’s man. There’d always been something more important on his mind when Elijah had wanted to talk to him. Perhaps Elijah had made his relationship with Morgan worse by turning up to his first training session wearing thick dark eyeliner and a rainbow tie-died shirt. He’d discovered it was best everyone was clear about who he was from the beginning.

There’d been some sideways glances and raised eyebrows, but no one had confronted him and, over the past few months, he’d established a strong camaraderie with his fellow volunteers. Except for Morgan. He always felt he had to prove himself. His major freak out the first time he’d done roof-safety training probably hadn’t helped. Turned out heights and he were not the best of friends. Another issue his ex had left him with.

Morgan spoke with Kay Patton, whose family

owned the winery. Kay looked distinctly unhappy, and Morgan appeared none too pleased either. At least Elijah wasn't the only one Kay scowled at. As he walked towards them, Kay said, "You'll do what you're told." She glared at Elijah and stalked off.

"What was that about?" Elijah asked.

Morgan let out a shaky breath as if trying to control his anger. "She didn't appreciate us taking up most of her car park with equipment."

Elijah shook his head. Way to have empathy for a missing child.

"What happened to Jamie?" Morgan asked.

"He twisted his ankle."

Morgan grunted. "Get him to fill out an incident report." He dug through his folder and handed Elijah one.

"Anything else you need me to do?"

"Nah. Just get the form filled out." He stared after Kay, effectively dismissing Elijah.

Elijah wandered back to the ambulance. Noah's parents were thanking Jamie and the paramedics again. "Come on," the father said. "Let's go get ice cream." Noah perked up and held out his arms to his dad.

Jamie lay on the stretcher, an ice pack on his elevated foot.

"What did Guy say?" Elijah asked.

"It's just a sprain. I've got to keep it rested for a day or so." He grimaced.

"Can you drive?"

Guy answered for him. "Not today."

Jamie frowned. "Hopefully I can by Monday, otherwise I'll have to get Mum to take me into work."

And there was the downside to crushing on Jamie—he still lived with his parents.

"I can give you a lift home from the depot," Elijah

said.

Jamie hesitated. "That would be great."

Why the hesitation? They'd laughed together on the walk back. Was he really that upset about Siobhan's suggestion people might think he was gay? Jamie didn't strike him as someone who was insecure about his reputation. He handed Jamie the form. "Morgan wants you to fill this out."

Jamie groaned. "You got a pen?"

Lincoln walked over, took one out of his shirt pocket. "Here. Want a lift home?"

"Elijah's taking me," Jamie said.

Elijah grinned. At least Jamie wasn't fobbing him off when he got another offer.

"All right. Take care of yourself. I'll see you Sunday night." Lincoln went to talk to Morgan.

Jamie filled out the form, his forehead rumped as he concentrated. Cute. Everything about Jamie Zanetti was attractive, from his luscious dark brown eyes, to his eyelashes which went on and on, and the designer stubble, always trimmed to perfection. His short brown hair wasn't quite styled to Elijah's level, but it was always neat and even though the bright orange clothing wasn't subtle, somehow Jamie managed to look damn fine in it.

He'd been lusting after Jamie since February when he'd seen him for the first time after moving back to town. OK, so that wasn't quite true. Jamie had starred in a number of his teenage fantasies as well, even though he'd been certain Jamie was straight. Besides, Elijah hadn't been confident enough in those days to even consider asking someone out.

"Done." Jamie handed Elijah the form. "Can you give it to Morgan?"

"Sure." Their fingers brushed as he took the paper

and a thrill ran through Elijah's body. Yeah, he was seriously smitten. And it wasn't just Jamie's hotness, he was a nice guy as well. Seeing him reassure Noah and blink back tears at the reunion had warmed Elijah's heart.

He had to get to the bottom of Jamie's sexuality. He snorted at his pun, shaking his head. He'd organise the Netflix binge session soon.

As Elijah returned to the ambulance, his gaze caught two people at the base of the stairs to the restaurant. The owner, Richard Patton and his daughter, Kay.

"Dad, it's time to go home." Kay tugged on her father's arm, but he didn't move. Instead he stared at the ambulance.

"What's going on?" Richard asked.

Kay's sigh was audible. "I told you, Dad. A boy went missing, but they've found him." Kay glared at Elijah, pulling Richard towards the car.

Kay hadn't been particularly friendly to him when he'd worked at the winery, but since Richard had been diagnosed with early onset dementia, she was a lot more gruff. Not that he blamed her. Suddenly she was in charge of the whole winery as well as dealing with a father who was losing more and more of his memory.

The sheds beyond the playground caught Elijah's attention. He'd spent a couple of months working there, mostly picking grapes and helping around the property. The buildings where the wine was made had been strictly off limits to plebs like him. Richard had always been paranoid about people wanting to steal his secrets.

Not that it mattered. He now had a dream job.

He strolled to the ambulance where Guy was giving Jamie clearance to leave.

Jamie shuffled to the edge of the stretcher.

“Let me help.” Again, Elijah tucked his shoulder under Jamie’s arm and wrapped a hand around his waist. Maybe he was a sad little panda for feeling this damn good having Jamie so close to him.

They moved to the SES land cruiser waiting for them and Elijah opened the door.

“Bit unco were you?” Brenton teased as Jamie got in.

“Had an argument with a rock,” Jamie said, flashing him a grin.

“You just wanted to get out of the depot audit Morgan threatened us with,” someone else said.

“Hey, at least he found the boy.” Elijah’s arm brushed Jamie’s as he got in next to him.

“Thank God for that,” Brenton said. “I was getting worried.”

“We all were,” Jamie said.

“Three cheers for Jamie,” Siobhan called from the front seat.

At the rousing cheers, Elijah grinned. A successful outing was always cause for celebration.

At the depot, Morgan asked, “How are you getting home?”

“Elijah’s giving me a lift,” Jamie said.

Morgan nodded. “The two of you can go. The rest of us will pack up.”

“Thanks.”

Elijah smiled. Finally a chance to have Jamie to himself. They got into his blue hatchback and Elijah said, “I might need directions. It’s not the same road as Kit’s is it?”

“Take a left out of here.”

His car seemed incredibly small with Jamie in the passenger seat, the hint of his spicy aftershave wafting between them. He needed to say something. “What

have you got planned for the weekend?”

“I was going to play football on Sunday, but that’s a bust.”

“Good point.” Nerves swelled in his stomach. He should just ask Jamie out for coffee, something totally casual and figure out where Jamie’s interests lay. Jamie wasn’t the type of guy who would be offended by the offer of a date. It shouldn’t ruin the casual friendship they had.

OK, not so much a friendship, more of a small-town thing where Elijah’s friends were friends with Jamie’s friends. They only really saw each other at SES training, though occasionally bumped into each other if Elijah watched the football or the motocross. And usually he went because he hoped to run into Jamie.

He was pathetic.

In Europe, he’d had no problems asking guys out. Though he had hung out in gay bars most of the time.

“What about you?”

Jamie’s voice startled Elijah from his thoughts. “I’ll be milking at Kit’s place both afternoons.” She had asked him to work a weekend shift because she was helping Fleur with wedding preparations on Saturday and had dinner with Lincoln’s parents on Sunday. He didn’t mind. Kit was one of his best friends and he was thankful she’d given him a job doing what he loved.

Silence fell. It shouldn’t be so hard. Normally people couldn’t shut him up. “I’m glad Noah was all right.”

Jamie sighed, ran a hand through his luscious hair. “I was getting worried. The kid wandered further than I thought he would.”

“I’m glad you heard him. He was well camouflaged.”

“Yeah. I hate the search and rescues,” he said. “Not knowing what we’ll find. My stomach gets tied in knots each time we’re called out.” His voice was gruff.

Elijah's heart went out to him. "You've been on a few?"

Jamie nodded. "The last one wasn't great—suicide." His voice was dull.

Elijah reached out and squeezed his hand. "That must have been tough."

Jamie twisted his hand and squeezed him back before letting go. "It was, but it's not uncommon. Searches usually involve kids, the elderly or the mentally ill. Only occasionally is it a hiker who's lost."

When he'd joined the SES, Elijah had expected to be doing things like helping with storm damage more than any real rescue missions. Though now winter had arrived, there'd probably be more storm work.

"Turn right here." Jamie's voice made him jump.

Get a grip. He noted the cheese factory sign on the turn-off and something clicked. "Your parents own the cheese factory, don't they?"

"Yeah."

"Do you help out much?"

"If they need it."

It was nice he helped, though they were back to the downer of him living with his parents. Still he'd only been back in Blackbridge since the beginning of the year and it was hard to find a place to rent. Elijah had got lucky when he'd moved back.

Elijah turned into the cheese factory driveway and Jamie directed him to the cute little farmhouse surrounded by beautiful lush gardens. A black Labrador ran out barking.

"Sasha's friendly," Jamie said, reaching for the door handle.

"Let me help you inside."

Elijah hurried around to Jamie's side. The porch light was on and Jamie used the stair bannister to hop

up the steps onto the wooden verandah that encircled the house.

“We’ll go around the back,” Jamie said.

That suited Elijah fine. More time with his arm around Jamie. Light spilled through the glass window in the back door. As Elijah opened it, a rich garlicky smell wafted towards him from the kitchen. “Smells like someone has been cooking.”

“Mum,” Jamie said.

They shuffled into the kitchen where Jamie’s mother, a small dark-haired woman, stirred a pot on the stove. “Hey, Mum.”

She gasped and hurried over. “What happened?” She pulled out a chair at the table for Jamie.

“Twisted my ankle. It’s nothing serious. This is Elijah.”

Elijah held out his hand. “Nice to see you again, Mrs Zanetti.” He’d met her briefly at Kit and Lincoln’s wedding a couple of months back.

She pushed it aside and hugged him with a grin. “Call me Rosa.” She squatted to inspect Jamie’s ankle and whistled. “Have you had an x-ray? Do you need any painkillers?” She pulled out another chair for him to put his ankle on.

“It’s fine, Mum. The paramedics gave me something.”

“Oh, did you find the boy?”

“Yeah. Just before dark.”

“Good. His parents must have been frantic. I remember when you were in kindy and visited Kit on your own.” She put a hand to her chest. “Scared the life out of me for a good ten minutes until we found you climbing over the gate between our properties.”

Jamie flushed. “Elijah doesn’t need to hear stories of what I did as a kid.”

Elijah chuckled. "Sure he does. I need something to prove Jamie Zanetti isn't perfect." He grinned at Rosa. "No one has a bad word to say about him."

"I should hope not," Rosa said. "He's perfect." She kissed Jamie's cheek. "Except when he's not doing what his mother tells him."

Jamie groaned.

"What's all the noise?" Jamie's father walked into the kitchen and glanced at Jamie's ankle. "What have you done?"

"It's just a sprain."

"Damn. I was hoping to get your help in the shop tomorrow. Elsie called in sick and your mum and I have plans for our anniversary."

Jamie hesitated. "I should be able to put some weight on it."

What was he thinking? "Guy told you to stay off it all weekend, he ordered elevation and ice."

Jamie scowled at him. "It's their thirty-fifth wedding anniversary."

How beautiful. They shouldn't miss out. Elijah hesitated. Though maybe it would seem strange. Never mind, they could always say no. "I have the morning free," he said. "If you can show me what to do, I can help out."

Mr Zanetti frowned. "Sorry, who are you?"

Oh, right. He held out his hand. "Elijah Johnson. We met at Kit and Lincoln's wedding."

Mr Zanetti shook it. "Right. I thought you looked familiar. Harold."

How could Elijah convince him, he was reliable? "Jamie could even stay seated and supervise, tell me what to do. I just need to be gone by three so I can milk Kit's cows."

"You're Kit's farmhand!" Harold made the

connection. "She's always praising you."

Elijah flushed. "The feeling's mutual."

Harold glanced at his son. "What do you think?"

Jamie nodded. "We'll manage. Joy will be there as well, won't she?"

"Yeah." He turned to Elijah. "Thanks so much. We'll pay you going rates. It's been a while since we've had a Saturday off, and I've got something special planned."

"Which he won't tell me about," Rosa added.

"It wouldn't be a surprise if I did." The affectionate smile and the way his gaze tracked his wife's movements in the kitchen showed Elijah how much they still loved each other after all these years. It was sweet, the kind of love he wanted in his life.

"Why don't you stay for dinner?" Rosa asked. "It's just about ready and Harold can fill you in on what's required." She went back to the stove.

Did Jamie want him to stay?

Jamie smiled and gave a small nod. "Go on. Mum's food tastes as good as it smells."

Elijah's heart squeezed. "All right. Thanks. I'd love to."

Maybe the attraction wasn't one-sided after all.

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