



# THE ATTACK

WHEN THE PAST COMES TO GET YOU...



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'A MASTERFUL STORYTELLER.' *GUARDIAN*

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**I RECOGNISED HIM** at once. He was ten years older and three times bigger, but his eyes were the same—wideset and ice-green, with thick, dark lashes. He was still skinny. Still scabby. Still at odds with the world.

I took one look at him and it all came flooding back. Otford. Joyce. The lies. The police.

I'd fled to a deserted island, but I couldn't seem to escape Aaron Rooney.

~

He arrived on a Sunday with twelve other boys. Their ferry was late. I'd been waiting on the jetty for a good twenty minutes when MV *Kooringal* chugged to a halt in front of me, nudging the piles and churning up water. From the bow I was thrown a mooring line, which I looped around the nearest bollard. The throb of the engine was almost drowned by a buzz of excited voices.

Something was wrong. The ferry master wore a flinty expression. I could sense the deckhand's disquiet. Scanning the gaggle of teenage boys near the stern, I realised one of them was wrapped in a towel. His hair looked wet—or was it just greasy? Beside him, Shaun Steiger was grim-faced.

‘Get back!’ Shaun barked. ‘Give the deckhand some room!’

He was dressed for combat. The boys were in hoodies and ripped jeans. They shouldered their lumpy backpacks, staggering as the deck bobbed beneath them. I spotted Joe Malouf helping one of the boys with his straps and buckles. Like Shaun, Joe was wearing fatigues. All four veterans were crisply turned out in spotless uniforms, neat buzzcuts and polished boots. They looked weirdly immaculate next to the teenagers.

‘All right, fall in!’ Shaun was using his parade-ground voice. Behind him, a dark kid with a big grin pretended to throw one leg over the bulwark. ‘Fall in means line up, Mr Kollios,’ Shaun continued, as if he had eyes in the back of his head. ‘We don’t want another accident.’

Another accident?

The deckhand shoved one end of the gangway onto the weathered boards of the jetty, then moved aside as the whooping, jostling boys spilled past her.

‘Take your time!’ Shaun blared. I was trying to count heads. Two. Three. Four. One of the boys started stomping towards the boathouse.

‘Dean! Get back here!’ Joe yelled. When the fleeing kid ignored him, he shot off in pursuit.

Six. Seven. Eight. Suddenly I saw those eyes—those familiar eyes—and my stomach clenched.

No. It couldn't be.

'Hi, Robyn.' Shaun stopped to greet me, punctilious as always. He stood at ease, feet apart, hands clasped behind him. 'You got a delivery?'

He was looking at my wheelbarrow. I nodded, my own gaze following the kid in the black Satanic Temple T-shirt. Aaron? No. Surely not.

'Do you want some help?' asked Shaun. 'Rhys could spare a minute. Eh, Rhys?'

'Roger that.' Rhys was the youngest veteran, and the tallest. I stood eye to eye with Shaun, who was six foot in his socks, but Rhys towered over us both. A gentle giant with curly blond hair, Rhys was a quiet, laid-back kind of guy because he didn't need to be anything else.

'There isn't much. Most of the stuff came yesterday.' I'd finished counting heads: thirteen. That wasn't right. There were supposed to be fourteen campers. Where was the last kid? He couldn't be on board; the deckhand was already heaving my boxes onto the jetty.

'Is that everyone?' I asked.

'Vijay did a runner on his way to Cleveland. Don't know if his poor mum's found him yet.' Shaun pivoted on his heel and pointed at the boy in the towel. 'Flynn tried to get away too. Jumped off the boat.'

I gasped.

'He's a bit of a drama queen.' Shaun's voice was dry and

reassuring. 'I said to him after we fished him out: it was gutsy, mate, but it was stupid. There's a hell of a lot of sharks in Moreton Bay.'

'Is he all right?'

'Oh, yeah. Scared himself shitless. And then he got a huge dressing-down from the skipper.' Shaun nodded at the ferry master, who was watching us from the wheelhouse window and didn't nod back. 'I hope this won't put a spanner in the works,' Shaun said. He didn't sound worried because he never sounded worried. As a commanding officer he ticked every box: he was calm but not disengaged, leathery but not ancient, greying at the temples but still dark on the crown. 'If we get banned from the ferry service, we'll have to charter a boat,' he continued thoughtfully, as the gangway was dragged back on board with a crash. 'It'll be pricey. Anyway, let's hope Flynn's got it out of his system. You right there, Rhys?'

'Yep.' Rhys had already dumped a box of iceberg lettuce into my wheelbarrow.

'Okay. Let's make a move, then.' Shaun turned back to me. 'So we'll see you in ten minutes? On the parade ground?'

He was talking about the open stretch of grass that lay between the old male and female compounds. The dirt road from the jetty ended right there, in front of the dining hall.

I nodded. 'Who's that kid in the black T-shirt? The droopy one with hair all over his face?'

Shaun glanced towards the campers, who were retreating down the jetty. I could almost hear gears clicking as he worked his way through a mental list. 'That's Darren,' he said at last.

‘Darren King. Why? Do you know him?’

Darren? ‘Maybe.’ I needed another look.

‘His mum’ll be at the passing-out parade. Sue King? Ring a bell?’ When I shook my head, Shaun started moving off. ‘This won’t take long,’ he told me over his shoulder. ‘We’ll run through the usual introductions. And if there’s anything you want to say...’

‘One of the toilets is broken. There’s a sign on the door.’ I was waiting for a replacement fill valve.

Shaun raised his hand without looking back. Rhys had already flung both mooring lines at the deckhand, who was closing the starboard gate as the *Kooringal* pulled away from me. The horn sounded once, twice, three times. Shaun shouted an order.

I stood for a moment, gazing at the ferry’s white wake. Darren? Aaron?

Weird.

~

All my deliveries came by ferry because I lived on Finch Island—or, more correctly, Buangan Pa. It had once been a lazaret. Half the old buildings had collapsed; the rest of them, lovingly restored, had been turned into a fairly basic camping and conference centre. The fences were gone. Nine lepers’ huts were now fully furnished cabins. The men’s dining hall was still a dining hall, but the women’s had become a dormitory, as had the hospital.

Every building had been constructed in that ubiquitous

pre-war government style of white weatherboard, deep verandas and generous windows. Even the lepers' huts had their own little verandas, though not in the Aboriginal compound. If you were a black leper, you were given a hut made of corrugated iron with a concrete floor and no glass in the windows.

Those huts were pretty grim. They were at the very rear of the complex, not far from the cemetery, and shielded from the other buildings by a thicket of she-oak. I had a feeling my employer didn't want to advertise their existence. They were heritage listed so they had to be well maintained, but they were embarrassing. Shameful.

It was hard enough persuading people to book holidays in an old leper colony without that niggling reminder of Indigenous torment. Even our corporate bookings were negligible, probably because the huts didn't have bathrooms. Two former bathhouses had been nicely refitted with composting toilets and private shower cubicles, but most bankers these days probably want heated towel rails. And though the old matron's house had its own bathroom—along with three bedrooms, a kitchen and a living room, all for hire—the only other private bathroom on the island was at my place.

I lived in the back of the superintendent's quarters, behind the office and the 'museum': a large room full of photos, chamber pots, medical equipment, ledgers, samplers and cricket bats. There was also a model of the original complex, with every tiny building neatly labelled. The school groups that came to the island were always forced to shuffle past this collection, clutching their pens and project sheets. Biology

classes sometimes tramped down to the mangrove swamps, where they made notes and complained about the insects. But there weren't many school visitors. My busy times were during the holidays, when the whole place was booked out by religious groups.

Otherwise, I did most of my business with Shaun's company, Vetnet.

Once a month Shaun and his staff would book the island for a six-day boot camp. They would bring over about fifteen teenage boys and give them a dose of tough love. Thanks to Shaun, I'd dealt with a lot of broken doorknobs and urine in unexpected places. But the camps must have been successful, because Shaun kept coming back. And back.

Most of the boys were sent by parents or foster carers. Some were referred by the police as part of a government diversion program. Many were problem kids. Marginal kids. Kids with learning difficulties, behavioural issues, psychological disorders. I don't know how many of them realised they'd come to an old leper colony—the word 'leper' never passed Shaun's lips. I'm not sure if most of the boys even knew what lepers were. But there was a sign near the office, and another on the door of the museum. Someone always twigged in the end.

'We're just another bunch of fucking lepers,' I heard one camper growl after he'd read the sign. 'They just want us out of sight in the middle of fucking nowhere.'

He made it sound like a bad thing. But then again, he wasn't me.

‘Welcome to Finch Island. From now on you’ll call me sir.’

Shaun’s voice echoed across the parade ground. Thirteen boys were lined up on the grass in front of him, each standing behind a pile of clothes: a pair of army boots, some khaki socks, a boonie hat and a set of folded camo fatigues, all with name tags. I’d placed the kits in two careful rows, at arm’s length from each other.

‘I’ve done three tours of Afghanistan with the Australian Defence Force,’ Shaun said, ‘and I’m here to tell you I wouldn’t have survived those tours without discipline, loyalty, honesty and respect.’

Some of the boys were listening. Others had let their packs slide to the ground and were flexing their sore shoulders. One had taken out his phone. One was already trying on his uniform.

The kid in the Satanic Temple T-shirt was restlessly kicking the ground. He’d lowered his head, so I couldn’t see his face. But there was something ominously familiar about his inability to keep still.

‘Mr Henderson!’ Shaun barked at the phone kid. ‘There’s no signal on this island, so you might as well put that down.’ He didn’t even glance in my direction before adding, ‘Isn’t that right, Ms Ayres?’

As a matter of fact it wasn’t. You could pick up a signal in a couple of spots, but you had to climb a hill to do it. I just nodded.

‘Ms Ayres is the caretaker here,’ Shaun explained. ‘She’s

employed by Queensland Parks and Wildlife. You will address her as Ms Ayres or ma'am.'

A few boys spared me a look. Most weren't interested. Darren certainly wasn't; he didn't stiffen or raise his head. He didn't seem to recognise my name.

Though Rhys's gaze flicked towards me, he maintained his poker face. So did Joe Malouf. It was Warren Doyle who winked. He was the only veteran with visible scars: a nasty divot near his jaw and another on his neck. Unlike Rhys, who was a big, placid labrador of a guy, or Joe—small and earnest and emotional—Warren had a touch of the maverick. The army had rescued him from a troubled adolescence, so maybe that had something to do with it.

'Ms Ayres is our commander-in-chief. Her rules apply here. She will always have the last word.' This was Shaun's usual spiel, but it never worked. The boys would treat me like a cross between their mother and their maid until I put my foot down. It helped that I was tall and rangy; you always have an advantage when kids need to look up at you. 'Is there anything you'd like to add, Ms Ayres?'

'Only that one of the toilets is broken.' I pointed at the men's bathroom. 'There's a sign on the door of the cubicle.'

'All right. Hear that? Stay off the broken toilet.' Shaun's brisk nod told me I could leave if I wanted. He knew I had things to do. Emails to answer. A wheelbarrow to unload.

But I couldn't drag myself away. Not until I was sure.

'On this island you gentlemen are my platoon and I am your platoon commander,' Shaun went on. 'We'll be dividing

you into sections. Those in the front row will be section one. I'll be your section commander and Mr Burgin will be your 2IC.' He nodded at Rhys. 'Section two is in the back. Your commander will be Mr Doyle...' This time he aimed the nod at Warren. '...and your 2IC will be Mr Malouf over there. You will address all the officers as sir.' Raising his voice over a low mutter of protest, Shaun snapped, 'Mr King! Eyes on me, please!'

Darren looked up with a scowl—and that scowl made my heart sink.

'Mr King, we don't stare at the ground in this platoon. We look people in the eye because we have respect. Respect for ourselves and respect for each other.' Shaun studied the ragtag collection of teenagers in front of him. Then he said, 'But respect isn't a right. You have to earn it. That's why I want you to empty your bags.'

There was a stunned silence. At last the boy with the phone cried, 'You can't do that!' He had flawless skin and thick, floppy hair so beautifully cut that I decided he must have well-off parents. The only thing marring his perfection was a slightly beaky nose.

'On the contrary, Mr Henderson, we can. Your parents signed a contract to that effect.' Shaun began to pace up and down, pausing to lock eyes with every camper in the front row. 'Bags. Emptied. Now.'

'Fuck this.' It was the kid who'd stormed off the jetty. Shane?...No, Dean. His hair hung in ratty little plaits or dreadlocks—I wasn't sure exactly what they were, but they

probably didn't need much maintenance. He was nearly as tall as Rhys, raw-boned, gangly and wild-looking.

He started walking away.

'Report back here, Mr Hoegel!' Shaun's voice cracked through the air like a whip, but the kid kept moving.

'There's nowhere to go, Dean,' Warren weighed in. 'We're on an island.'

Dean ignored him. So Shaun nodded at Rhys, who snapped to attention and charged off like an obedient sheepdog.

By this time several younger boys were dumping the contents of their packs onto the ground: socks, sunscreen, pyjamas, iPads, chargers, earbuds—even a comic book. Joe began to collect all the technology, which he placed in a plastic bin. *My* plastic bin.

'Wait—what?' Henderson, the kid with the fancy haircut, looked appalled. I remembered his full name: Zac Henderson. Casting my mind back to Shaun's notes, I couldn't recall much else about Zac, except that his parents had sent him.

'You can't take my phone!' he yelped, clutching his Kathmandu rucksack.

'You were told not to bring a phone,' Shaun replied. 'You were told it would be confiscated.'

'No, I wasn't!'

'Well, it was right there in the brochure. You should have read the brochure.' Before Zac could speak, Shaun addressed another kid in the front row. 'Mr Bosanko, I need you to empty your bag. Right now.'

Bosanko. I remembered *that* name. Nathan Bosanko

had been referred to Vetnet by the police. He'd already been formally cautioned for carrying a spray can in public. He also seemed to like wandering around other people's properties, though he hadn't been charged with trespassing.

He was small and slight, with little dark eyes like kalamata olives and a tattoo on his wrist that looked home-made. A slightly eerie smile was plastered across his face.

'Okay,' he said. Then he upended his backpack, which disgorged—among other things—a tape measure, a hair ribbon, a tube of icing, a mascara wand and an eraser shaped like a sushi roll.

'Do you have a phone?' asked Shaun. When Nathan produced one from his pocket, Shaun took it and said, 'Good. You'll get it back before you leave.'

Over by the women's bathrooms, Rhys was locked in a standoff with Dean Hoegel. Warren was using the sheer force of his stare to make the older kids shake out their packs. Flynn, the boy who'd jumped overboard, was wailing, 'This is so unfair! I can't do this stupid camp! I have a condition!' Zac Henderson was muttering something about human rights as Joe Malouf stooped to pick up a tattered porn magazine that had tumbled out of a bag in the front row. The owner of this bag was smirking gently; I wondered if the magazine was his way of saying 'fuck you'.

Darren King looked sullen when Shaun finally stopped in front of him. Peering at the veteran through a lank curtain of hair, the teenager offered up that familiar scowl again. But other things about him weren't familiar. His pimples. His

chin-fuzz. His shoulders—wide shoulders that stood out like the wings of a coathanger. The rest of his body seemed to dangle off them in a boneless kind of way.

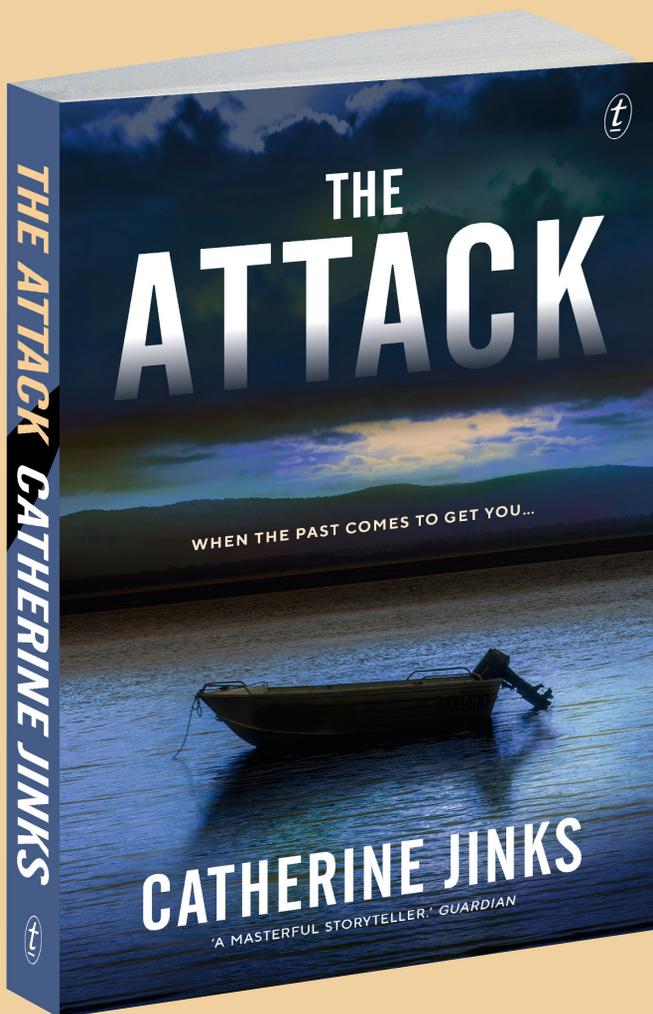
Was he really the same boy? It was hard to tell. Ten years can totally transform a child.

Then he emptied his rucksack. Tumbled among the clothes were a pair of cheap sunglasses, an empty chip packet and an iPhone.

There was also a brown Swiss Army knife. When I saw that, my stomach seemed to do a backflip.

*Oh my God, I thought. It's him. It really is him. It's Aaron Rooney.*

*Shit.*



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