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WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN

# TONY CAVANAUGH

## KINGDOM OF THE STRONG



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**TONY CAVANAUGH**

# THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KING

I AM SINKING.

All around me the press and swell of water. Above me a shimmering surface, a radiance of dappled sun. I can't get back up to it. I can't hear anything but the roar inside my ears. I'm sinking. Below me I can't see form or place, but it's dark. I'm on my way down to the ocean floor. If I make it there, still alive, I'll probably thud. My arms are waving, my legs are scrambling. I'm trying to find something firm, for my feet to touch, to springboard back up towards the surface, but there's nothing, only the crush of water. Drowning is supposed to be a pleasant way to die, that's what I've been told. Really? Better than falling asleep and not waking? If I open my mouth and inhale, a rush of cold water will fill my lungs and I'll sink even faster. Will it bring bliss, that rush of cold water? I don't think so; I think it will bring panic, an onslaught of panic, greater than the panic I'm feeling now.

Before I was sinking I was getting scared – scared that we were so far from the shore, like the old man and the sea, from the book Dad read me when I was in bed and he'd sworn off the grog, last time for sure, when I lay on the cool pillow that smelled of lemon and the breeze came in off the paddocks, fluttering the curtains, when he came in and sat on the end of my bed and said: Son, this is a great book.

My heart is being crushed. I'm not so good at science, but I think that's what happens when you sink in water: your insides get crushed.

Why aren't I floating? Why can't I float to the top? Why am I sinking? It's against the law of nature, isn't it? I'm messed up. An aberration.

I think I can see the bottom. Will I hear a thud? Maybe not. No sounds down here. It's really quiet. Getting darker too. I can't make out the outline of our little fishing boat. What happened at the end of *The Old Man and the Sea*? Did the man die? Did he bring that fish in to land? I might have been asleep by the last page.

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I HATE WATER. Not the stuff that comes out of taps – that's okay. I hate being in it. Oceans. Lakes. Swimming pools. Rivers. I almost drowned when I was eleven. My father, in a riotous fit of spontaneous whatever, after too many beers and my worried looks, lifted me from the floor of our rental tin boat and tossed me into the sea. I sank. In what I guess was a sudden hit of the guilts, he then jumped in after me and scooped me up, mid-sink, and carried my limp body back up to the surface. He didn't apologise, didn't say anything, just plonked me into the boat, started the engine and steered back in the direction of home. Since that day, some thirty-five years ago, I've managed to avoid bodily contact with water, aside from taking showers and baths. People scoff when I tell them this. 'Oh but, Darian, swimming in the ocean is just the most exhilarating experience.' That sort of thing. No, it's not. Give me a footpath, give me concrete, give me a place where my feet are firm on the ground.

It certainly wasn't nostalgia then that led me to a cabin on the edge of a lake, a place of hibernation where I had been for almost a month, where I would sit on the balcony staring at the expanse of charcoal-grey water; where, most days, I'd drag

a small wooden boat, which came with the hire of the cabin, into the water, jump in and chug towards the middle, casting a line, spending hours unsuccessfully fishing while I stared at the mountains in the distance, whose peaks were always shrouded in layers of winter mist.

I was the only tourist in the Great Lakes district on the coast of New South Wales. I'd turned off the highway in search of a motel and got lost while driving along twisted roads that clung to the forms and shapes of the jagged mountain range that hovered over a series of interlocking lakes close to the Pacific Ocean. I'd been driving hard and fast, away from failures. Rose, a woman I loved, and The Train Rider, a killer I'd hunted, their worlds coalescing into an increasingly dark spiral I was unable to control, were both now lost to me.

Rose I had left behind in Byron Bay, a day's drive from the lake, and The Train Rider, a man whose depraved serial killings had begun to define me, was in the wind. Would I connect with either of them again? I didn't know. I was in the wind too.

Sitting in a wooden boat in the middle of a lake in dark winter, I was doing an awesome job of not thinking about where to go to next. Back home, on the Noosa River, up in sunny Queensland, my land of sarongs and hammocks, a life of early retirement, didn't yet feel like an option. My house on the river – yes, more water, but I only look at it – was a brooding reminder of those failures. Not long ago Rose had moved in and her scent would still be in the walls even though she was no longer there. The Train Rider had followed me from Melbourne, had infiltrated the entire area, from Noosa to Nambour, Gympie, Tewantin, towns dotted across the hinterland and coastline; he had vanished just as I came close to finally catching him, but he had left a mark on that part of my life that wouldn't fade anytime soon.

I had tried not to think about him, which was as successful as not noticing that daylight followed the night. The Train Rider was a monstrous killer. He'd taken, if we were to believe his horrid

ex-wife, hundreds of girls in a rampage that'd lasted decades. Snatched them off trains, raped then killed them. Then stuffed them using a state-of-the-art taxidermy process. It was beyond anything I had ever seen, and the house full of his victims, naked and preserved, was like a horror movie that I couldn't shake off. I'd failed to catch him. First in Melbourne, as a cop, then on the Sunshine Coast. I didn't like failure. I wasn't used to it and his survival ate at me like a decay inside my body. As far as we knew he had fled the country. The Train Rider, Kirk Thornhill, was also very wealthy and I couldn't help but see him sitting on a beach in a resort somewhere in Asia where the policing isn't what you'd call rigorous, rising from the sand and surf to ride another third world train, take a girl and add her to a growing tableau of real-life dolls.

I'd stay here, on the lake, until the tourists and the sun turned up; that was my plan. And after that, there was no plan. Maybe a trip to Thailand to visit some of my late father's greatest hits in an effort to get to know him, the bars and the brothels where he spent his last couple of decades in the absence of the son he'd tossed into the sea in a drunken burst of anger a week before he closed the front door behind him, walked across the paddocks to the highway and never returned home.

I dragged my boat out of the water, up onto the sand, and hurled the anchor back into the lake. I lassoed another rope around the base of a tree on the shoreline and then began to trudge up towards my cabin. Yet again without any fish. I pulled my thick black woollen jacket tight around me. Light was fading and the chill of the night was fast developing, blowing down from the mountains.

A white Toyota Camry, late model, was parked out the front of my cabin, next to my mid-sixties bright red Studebaker. Hire car written all over it. Maybe another tourist in search of some midwinter lake activity, I thought at first. Then I saw, as I drew closer, that the front door to my cabin was wide open. I had a visitor.

‘Is that you, Darian?’ I heard from inside, as I walked towards the steps leading up to the porch.

‘Yeah, boss, it’s me,’ I said.

I stepped inside.

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THERE ARE THREE very different breeds of Police Commissioner. One is the guy – always a guy – who went from wearing a school uniform to wearing a police uniform, no interruption, and began to pound the footpath, learning the ways and whys in the land of crime, from the hopelessly pathetic to premeditated savagery, from the skivs and popheads to the gangs and killers. This is the guy who works his way up from the street; who, by the time he’s reached a desk on the top floor of HQ, has got to know every single person on the floors beneath him. Many are friends, some are enemies, but all of them have a job that he also did, once, so from his grand office of control he knows and understands the challenges of every working man and woman in the Force. When this type of Commissioner is a good guy, not corrupt or in dumb league with politicians, he earns a ferocious loyalty.

Then there’s the guy – pretty much, again, always a guy – who works his way up the ranks, does the hard yards, understands the rigours of the job, earns the respect of his men and women, pledges to help and then, having got the top job, finds himself seduced by the power and influence and turns on his men and women, once loyal but now increasingly disillusioned as his decisions and behaviour become more about currying favour with politicians than active concern for the wellbeing of his troops. This is the guy who disconnects and, in the job, grows into another, unrecognisable person. This is the guy who usually goes down in a coup.

Then there’s the Commissioner who went to university and studied up on criminology and psychology and business, and

arrived at the Force wearing a suit and carrying a degree and a whipper-snip skill in Microsoft Excel spreadsheets and wowed the fuck out of the gangs of accountants and lawyers with PowerPoint presentations and felt the cool comfort of a desk while noting trends and talking the talk. These men and women were becoming increasingly popular with governments. The bull-headed old guys were being eased out; they weren't so hot at TV news conferences and they didn't do the latte thing with the rest of the media. They smelled of beer and chased skirt. They were old school, twentieth century.

Well, it wasn't really that black-and-white. The character of Commissioners was always much more nuanced, but cops live in a black-and-white world. Good guys, bad guys, them and us, the boss who understood and the one who had no clue, living in a world of data and politics.

Copeland Walsh, the man waiting for me inside the cabin, was from the old school. He became a cop in the late fifties. His term as Commissioner started in the nineties and crossed into the early twenty-first century, when he was replaced by a hot shot graduate from Sydney University who managed to alienate the men and women in uniform, the police union and finally a new government, who eventually decreed that the infighting and disgruntlement of the police department needed to remain out of the newspapers. He'd been fired and Copeland had been brought back, out of retirement, to take over as Commissioner. It was supposed to be an interim seat-warming type of thing but Copeland was good at his job and loved by all, a rare and true blend of the old school with a complete understanding of spreadsheets, data and how to drink a coffee without offending anyone. He was now close to seventy-five, the mandatory age of retirement for public servants having been blissfully ignored by him and the government he served.

Copeland, nicknamed Copland because he was a walking encyclopaedia of the land of cops, taught me pretty much everything I knew and was responsible for my own fast-tracked

rise through the ranks to becoming Officer in Charge of Homicide at an unprecedentedly young age.

‘Forgive the intrusion, but there’s only so long an old man can stand outside in the cold. What say we light a fire?’

‘Good to see you, boss.’

‘And you, Darian. Haven’t aged a wink.’

‘Nor you.’ Copeland was a tall man, at least six foot four. And he was big. He didn’t walk. He lumbered. In his youth he had played cricket for Victoria. He was dressed in a dark-blue suit, blue and white striped shirt and a tie from one of the clubs he belonged to. This one today looked like the Melbourne Cricket Club tie. One of the most exclusive clubs in the country; took Copeland twenty-five years of waiting before he was granted membership.

‘Liar. But kind words, old son, kind words.’

He had already set the fire. Manners, which he had in abundance, had prevented him from lighting it; that would have been an intrusion too far. Scrunched-up newspaper, kindling and small logs had come from a cane basket next to the stone fireplace. The cabin was all wood, old dark hardwood. It had that rustic North American cowboy feel to it, a sort of pioneer let’s-be-men approach to walls and furnishings. There was an open-plan living and kitchen area with two bedrooms; everything I needed. Windows looked out to the lake and, on the other side, a forest of gum and tree ferns at the base of a mountain.

The flames took hold, crawled across the wood.

‘How’d you find me?’ I asked as I removed my coat and wet boots, sitting across from him.

‘Credit card on your check-in,’ he said.

I settled back in my chair and waited. Police Commissioners don’t leave their offices on the top floor of HQ, let alone the building itself, let alone the city or the state, let alone hire a car and drive a couple of hours from the nearest airport to a remote cabin by a lake for a fireside chat with a former detective who abruptly resigned four years before. And if they *do* undertake any of the

above, they don't do it alone. Whatever it was he needed from me it was important. To him.

'I understand that you read. To fill in the days,' he said.

'I do. But there hasn't been a day that felt it needed to be filled.'

'Embraced it totally? Good for you. Wish I could have said the same about my retirement. Bloody awful. Completely boring. I tried golf. That's what retirees are meant to do, that's the image on the sides of buses. Disaster. I felt as though I'd died and gone to hell. I tried to renovate the house but that was the same. And what was the point anyway? Renovations are for young couples, not an old man. Somebody suggested a cruise. I can't remember who but I remember thinking: Is this the end of the line? Sitting on a cruise ship, circling the world without point or meaning? Is this how it ends? You can imagine then how I felt when the Minister rang and asked if I'd go back, renew stability, keep the seat warm, a show of support for the troops until we found the right person to fill the post. No rushing the decision, that's what we agreed. Whoever was going to replace me needed to be thoroughly vetted. None of this postmodern psychobabble in the interview, either. A solid man. Or woman. Reliable. One of the troops. Someone they can look up to. None of this rancour and infighting. A leader. Someone with notches on his belt. Or hers. Know what I mean, Darian? Of course you do. Someone who's done the hard yards, walked the beats, worked in the tough divisions, successful conviction rate. But modern. New-media savvy. Might even have his own Twitter account. Or she might. No hint of corruption, of course. No scandal, or if there was, discounted. Thoroughly discounted. You know what the Force is like. *Service*, I should say. Rumours. Innuendo. Never escape that. But unless there's anything concrete, anything proven – you know what I mean, Darian? Of course you do – then it's just talk. Give me the facts. The evidence. That's our bread and butter.'

Copeland could be direct if he needed to but, in some instances, like this, the end point, the actual meaning of his speech, was arrived at via a circuitous route and, in some instances, again, like

this, there wouldn't appear to be a meaning or end point at all. I'd played this game before. I was one of the few who knew how to play it; in fact, I was probably the only one in the police department. Most cops just stared at him blankly, waiting for clarity.

'You want me to resolve Isobel Vine's death,' I said. It wasn't a question.

He smiled, as a father would to his son upon the latter correctly divining a tangled challenge.

'That's my boy! Always on top of it. I knew I could count on you. Always get to the end of a conversation before we reach it.'

'Racine's been nominated to replace you,' I said. Again, it wasn't a question.

He leaned forward, nodding, grinning, eager, excited. Like a teacher with his best student.

Outside it had begun to rain. This was a regular pattern: clouds of mist in the morning, the pretence of fair weather in the early afternoon, icy squalls at night. Usually I'd be sitting by the fire reading my way through *Infinite Jest*, written by the linguistic genius David Foster Wallace, who had also been a junior tennis champion and killed himself at the age of forty-six. My age. Rain spattered the windows.

'The government wants him, you want him, the men and women in uniform want him and even the police union want him,' I said.

Nod, nod, nod, smile, smile, smile. That's right, Darian, keep going.

'And he wants him.'

Nod, smile. Almost there, Darian.

'But there's that small matter of twenty-five years ago.'

'Tragic incident,' Copeland said. 'Hell of a misunderstanding.'

'And even though everyone's forgotten about it ...'

'Except you,' he interjected.

'... it's the sort of blemish that could derail him.'

'First thing the press will do upon his announcement. Look into his past service record.'

‘But if there’s been an independent inquiry, just completed ...’

‘Which fully exonerates him.’

‘... which fully exonerates him, then the blemish is gone. And Racine has a clear path to become the new popular, successful Police Commissioner.’

Go to the top of the class, Darian.

‘You’ll have your own office, staff of your choice, total independence, report only and directly to me, no interference. Excellent remuneration. One month, tops. Maybe two. Car and apartment, per diem, all provided.’

He was leaning closer, his hands clasped. By now, in this life I’d established in the cabin, I would normally not only be reading by the fire but I would have eaten. The owner of the cabin had taken pity on me and my inability to catch a fish in the entire time I’d been here and had given me a bundle of fresh trout and whiting to freeze; enhancing the tourist experience for me.

I also leaned forward. Copeland knew what was coming and edged even closer.

‘But what if I couldn’t exonerate him?’

‘If he’s guilty?’

‘If he’s guilty,’ I said.

‘It was suicide,’ he said firmly.

‘The Coroner gave an open finding. He was balancing suicide, self-inflicted accident *and* murder. He couldn’t decide between them. And it wasn’t just Racine implicated; there were other cops.’

Copeland held my look, spoke sternly, a righteous man. ‘I don’t, *cannot*, believe that Racine, or any of the others for that matter, did it. Killed that poor young woman. But if your investigation reveals that he did, or was somehow involved, even witnessing one of the others, he goes down. This is, as you understand, a matter driven by political expediency, but it has to be, at the end of the day, about justice. I wouldn’t have it any other way. Find the truth, Darian. I know you won’t let me down.’

For four years, since leaving police HQ in Melbourne, I had been sitting by the Noosa River in a generally successful attempt to capture a sane and tranquil life. River watching, reading in the hammock, pelican feeding, cooking and listening to the crash of the ocean and the swell of the river, the sounds of the birds and happy cries of tourists had become my new four walls of existence. Melbourne, which I had fled, and to which I had returned only once, briefly, while on the hunt for The Train Rider, was a city defined, for me, by murder. You know when you hear a song and it reminds you of a first kiss or a break-up maybe, or catch a fragrance and re-run a moment from the past, when those sensorial moments are flooded by distant memories, joyous or otherwise ... The grid, the suburbs, the streets, the beaches and parks were all imprinted upon me through a history and culture of rampage and blood. Bodies strewn across the landscape. A city of murder. That was Melbourne. That was where Copeland wanted me to return.

Since losing Rose and failing to catch The Train Rider, I'd come adrift, sitting in the middle of a lake, doing slow circles in the water. No direction home, that was me. Home, my new home on the Noosa River, was defined by a shimmering failure: the presence of a girl who left me and a serial killer who eluded me.

'Why not get Internal Affairs to do it?' I asked.

He leaned towards me, as if inviting me into a secret, and jabbed his finger at me.

'Too political. They're all driven by bias and innuendo. Active-duty cops investigating active-duty cops? No. *You*, Darian. You upped and left without a goodbye or a thanks-for-the-memories. Turned your back on us and left Victoria. No grudges, old son. No hard feelings, not on my account. I understood, when they told me. You're a rogue. A loner. True to the righteous values. Independent. No loyalties to sway you. Nothing but contempt, a back turned and a new life begun. There couldn't be a better choice for the job.'

What are you not telling me, boss? I wondered as I stood up.

‘Let’s cook up some trout,’ I said. ‘The rain will ease in an hour or so. Then you can grab your bag from the car. I’ll make up the bed in the second room.’

He grinned, the grin of a happy father, it seemed to me.