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THE CANE

ONE MISSING GIRL. NO SUSPECTS.
A TOWN ABOUT TO IGNITE.

**MARYROSE
CUSKELLY**

THE
CANE

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CUSKELLY

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

First published in 2022

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN 978 1 76087 985 3

Set in 13/18 pt Granjon LT Std by Bookhouse, Sydney
Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press, part of Ovato

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



The paper in this book is FSC® certified. FSC® promotes environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable management of the world's forests.

For my father, Terry Cuskelly,
and in memory of my mother, Irene Cuskelly.
In your house, I have always felt safe.

ONE

THEY'RE LIGHTING THE cane and Janet McClymont has not been found.

A week after she disappeared, her mother Barbara walked into Jensens' shop and bought every box of matches and all the Bic cigarette lighters on the shelves. She then stood outside striking the head of each and every match against the phosphorus strip, watching it flare before shaking out the flame and dropping the spent stick on the road. Then she drove down to the inlet and threw the lighters into the water.

No one knew what the hell she was playing at. Then it dawned on me. With the crush about to start, and all of us believing that her daughter's body must be lying in the cane, some harebrained notion had got hold of her. She thought she could stave off the lighting of the cane fires until Janet's body was found. You see, in Barbara's mind, on top of everything else that probably happened to her daughter, burning her body

would be yet another desecration. But nothing is going to stop the sugar crush. It's already been delayed. We're almost at the end of June, what with all the searching and the upset.

I mean, I understand Barbara's need to hope that after all this time someone will find Janet's body lying unblemished in the cane fields near where she found her daughter's bag. Or maybe even that the girl herself is alive. You have to remember, apart from the fact that she's been missing for so long, there's no evidence that Janet's dead. But hundreds of people combed through those drills from Quala to Kaliope and back again for weeks looking for her and found nothing. That hasn't stopped Barbara, though. She still goes out every morning by herself, walking through the cane fields belonging to the Creadies and the Tranters, looking for her daughter's remains. She comes back hours later, covered in dust and dirt.

I've got all the sympathy under the sun for her and Ted and what they're going through, but if their girl is in the cane, she's dead, and burning isn't going to change that. And I tell you what, I'd rather find her bones after they've been scorched clean by fire than see what she'd look like after a month of lying in this heat. Fire's cleansing, I reckon. When it goes through the cane, it burns off the dreck and drives out the rats, the snakes and those filthy toads. Sure, everything is scorched and black and there's ash everywhere, but the real muck, the stuff you can't bear to look at, it's all been burnt away.

Not that Barbara sees it like that, and I'm not saying I blame her. It put me in mind of that time Dot dropped her pearl earring that had belonged to her mother on the kitchen floor. We heard it bounce and there were only a few square feet

of floorboards where it could've possibly landed, but it was as if it'd disappeared into thin air. Just like poor little Janet McClymont disappeared into the cane as if something unseen had swallowed her up. But those fields have been searched thoroughly—dozens of times—and the cane must be harvested, and for that to happen it has to be burnt. Even the Tranters, with Connie Tranter being so close to Barbara, aren't going to be able to hold off much longer.

Connie was very taken with Barbara right from the start. Barbara's an artist, you see, and Connie knows a bit about that sort of thing. Culture and whatnot. Before she married Cam she had a public service job with Queensland Arts Council or some such. Gave it all up when she got married.

Barbara being an artist was why the McClymonts lived at Quala, rather than in town, in Kaliope, despite how much bigger it is. She'd only agreed to come north for Ted's job on condition that they bought a house with a view of the sea. As soon as they moved in she set up a studio with canvasses and brushes and paints in their big sleep-out on the eastern side of the house. All you could see from up there was ocean. That, and the cane, of course. There's nowhere you can't see the cane around here.

There's a few people around Quala who do arts and crafts, the kind of stuff you see sold in Kaliope for the tourists. Macramé owls, clocks with numbers made from shells, woven bags, that sort of thing. But Barbara, she's the genuine article, a real artist. She paints landscapes mainly. Big bloody canvasses. I had a bit of a gander at some of them hanging up at that housewarming they had not long after they arrived. They invited everyone in

Quala, even old blokes like me. I'd just got myself a beer when Barbara walked up behind me while I was having a look at one of her paintings she had up in the hall. Straight up, she asked, 'Well, what do you think, Arthur?' I told her it was very impressive. A close-up view of the rainforest up on Mount Tamborine, that's what Barbara said it was. A bit strange, but in a good way. Moody, I suppose you'd call it. Dense. Splashes of bright colour among the darkness of the trees. Not that I know anything about it—art, that is.

Anyway, Connie thought an awful lot of Barbara. They had a bit in common, I suppose. Neither of them being locals. Now, I know how that sounds. Connie's been living in Quala for what, almost thirteen years? But you know what I mean. It takes a while to be seen as part of the furniture in little places like this one.

Janet was walking up to the Tranters' place when she went missing. It was a Saturday evening, just on dusk. Connie had asked her to babysit her girls, Essie and the little one, Helen, overnight. Cam Tranter's brother had just got engaged and there was a bit of a shindig planned. Cam and Connie were going to be away till Sunday morning.

The McClymonts' house is right on the edge of Quala township and up against the boundary of the Creadies' place, and the Tranters are the next one over. Janet would have taken the track that runs through the Creadies' two biggest fields to get there. Lots of the local kids use that track—or used to—to walk to the main road to catch the bus to the high school in Kaliope of a weekday morning, or the one that goes late on a Saturday arvo if they're going to the pictures in town.

About twenty past six, Connie rang Barbara to see why Janet hadn't turned up. She was a reliable girl, you see. Barbara was in a tizz right away. Janet had left the house at least an hour earlier, maybe more, she said, which surprised Connie, because it would have only taken Janet twenty minutes to walk over to their place. Later on, the fact that Janet set out so early was enough to make people twig to the possibility that she'd arranged to meet someone—a boyfriend maybe—before she went to the Tranters'. It made things hot for Joe Cassar for a bit, because it had got about that he and Janet were keen on each other.

Anyway, Barbara was so worried that Cam left Connie with the girls to go and help Barbara look. And when he wasn't back within half an hour, Connie called John Creadie to see if he could help. He and his father Vince took off in the ute to look for Janet as well. After an hour or so Connie herself, still with all her makeup on and her hair curled, dropped her girls over to Jean Creadie to mind and she joined the men and Barbara in the search. Connie and Cam ended up missing his brother's engagement party altogether. Not that that's a tragedy, not compared to a young girl going missing.

For Cam and Connie, it immediately brought up memories of when Jean and Vince Creadie's daughter, Cathy, went missing. Of course, it must've hit the Creadies even worse. It must be nine, almost ten years ago that Cathy disappeared swimming off the rocks up at Danger Point. It was several days before they found her body. Cathy was about the same age as the McClymont girl when she died. Sixteen, I reckon, and John about four years older, I suppose. A terrible thing.

Terrible in all sorts of ways and for all sorts of reasons. Mind you, the McClymonts have had weeks to endure the uncertainty of what's happened to their daughter, and it's not over yet.

It took them a while to track down Ted McClymont that night. He'd gone out fishing with Les Comerford in the afternoon. Ted works for the Department of Primary Industries and he'd helped Les with a compensation claim against the state electricity commission. His cane crop had been damaged when they were replacing power poles or something. I can't remember exactly. Anyway, Ted knows a bit about these things and Les offered to take Ted out on his boat because he'd done such a good job for him. They'd stopped off for a few beers with Les's mates after they tied up the boat at the jetty.

Ted'd been drinking for a few hours by the time they found him, but he sobered up pretty quick smart once they told him Janet was missing, and he got stuck into searching for his daughter as well. Cam and the Creadies had searched alongside the track Janet would have taken, so Ted drove up and down the highway mostly. Cam went into Kaliope on a hunch and went round the pubs, but she wasn't there. Then he drove out to George and Nola Cassar's place because Barbara mentioned that Janet had dropped a few hints that she and Joe were going around together. No one was home. They were at one of Nola's people's place, apparently. A bit of a family get-together. Nola's the eldest of eight, so there's always birthdays and whatnot to celebrate.

The police weren't called until about ten o'clock that night. Some young bloke just out of the academy was the only copper at Kaliope station. There'd been a brawl earlier in the day at

the footy game in Candleford, between their blokes and the Kalliope team. It's still early in the season but there's a bit of bad blood left over from last year's grand final. All hell had broken loose again later at the Commercial Hotel in town when the Candleford boys turned up for another go. So there was no one around with any brains to take a report of a missing teenage girl seriously. The young constable didn't even let Bill Wren—he's the local sergeant—know about Janet until early the next day.

Barbara and Ted were out all night looking for their daughter, of course. As were Cam Tranter and John Creadie. Connie tried to persuade Barbara to get an hour's sleep, but she wouldn't hear a word of it. At sparrow's fart the next morning, before the local cops even turned up and got a proper search going, Barbara found Janet's shoulder bag a couple of drills into one of the Creadies' fields. Jean Creadie said she heard Barbara screaming her daughter's name all the way from their place up on the hill. I suppose it was then that Barbara knew her worst fears had probably been realised, because no woman I know, young or old, willingly goes anywhere without a bag of some sort. It was the only clue as to what had befallen her daughter, and a pretty strong indication she hadn't gone of her own accord.

The bag was open, all of Janet's things spilled out onto the grass. Her purse, I suppose, perhaps some homework to catch up on and whatever else it is that young girls carry round with them. Maybe a handkerchief. I think she would have had a handkerchief. She was a neat, clean little thing. I'd seen her round and about. She always had some little bit of feminine

frippery like the butterfly hair slide she was wearing in that photo they published in the paper. She had a knack for looking smart, well put-together—even I could see that—like her mother. Well, like her mother used to.

By the time the Kaliaope coppers arrived, most of the McClymonts' neighbours had joined in the search for the girl. Even Dot and me were helping as best we could. There were blokes on horses, blokes driving tractors, others on motorbikes tearing through the bush, and four-wheel drives roaring up hills and along the beach down at the inlet. We'd just about thrashed our way through the entire field where Barbara had found her daughter's things, as well as the one opposite and all along the riverbank. And a few men had already fanned out into the field beyond the creek further up. We'd found no other trace of her.

When the police managed to get a few of the searchers together, someone said they'd seen footprints in the sand by the river, but by the time the coppers went to look for them all the ground there had turned to mud, churned up by those who'd come running when word had got out.

None of us locals were saying it, but we were all thinking it—the same way we were when Vince and Jean's daughter Cathy first went missing—just how bloody easy it would be to hide something or somebody in this type of country. The cane fields are just the start of it; then there's the creeks, the gullies, the swamps, and the bloody mangroves, of course. The guinea grass was that tall, not to mention the cane. Most of us were soaking wet, our boots caked in mud from pushing through the waist-high grass and the gullies filled with muck. There'd

been so much rain in the months before that water was lying everywhere, and the growth was that thick. Plenty of snakes too.

I was half afraid of blundering across a wild sow and her piglets, but not much chance of that given the noise we were making. I gave myself a hell of a fright when I caught a glimpse of something white in an overgrown gully. They'd told us Janet had been wearing cropped white pants, you see, pedal pushers they called them, and a blue sleeveless top. Thought I was going to shit myself. I called over one of the Froome boys. Too bloody scared to find her by myself. Turned out to be a dead horse. Most of it was hidden in the long grass. It was one of its legs I'd seen poking out of the end of the gully. It had a white fetlock. We laughed, if you can believe it.

The search was all a bit bloody ad hoc, if you want the truth. At least on the first day. It wasn't until that afternoon when some of the women—Dot and Connie and Meg and Jean Creadie and a few others—brought sandwiches and tea and set up a canteen that the coppers got all the searchers together in one spot. The Jensens even donated soft drinks and chips, which was a bit of a turn-up for the books. Anyway, one of the coppers, I think it was Bill Wren, finally got around to marking off sections of a map of the surrounding area. It was only then that they got us to break into groups of two or three to systematically search within a four-mile radius of where Janet's bag had been found. Before that, we'd just been tearing off in whatever direction we got into our heads.

We searched all day. People came from everywhere to help. Even the tourists from the caravan park and hippies from that commune up near Danger Point, blokes from the dive shop.

There must have been hundreds of us charging around the place. And not just men. There were plenty of women too. At about five-thirty the coppers called it off for the day. It was too bloody dark to see anything. Ted McClymont made a point of shaking the hand of every man that was there. He was kind of hearty, trying to smile, slapping our backs and that. It was bloody cruel. I couldn't look him in the face.

On Monday, the principal of Kaliopo West High, Ern Shaw, told all the students they could have the day off to join the search, and before long every man and his dog from Kaliopo was traipsing round the place. Over the next five days, thousands of people turned out to look for her. We searched every creek, every waterhole. There were people tramping along the beaches north and south, a couple of army helicopters buzzing overhead, vehicles driving up and down the highway looking in ditches by the side of the road. Ted McClymont even hired a pilot with a private plane to fly him over the area. Apart from Barbara finding her daughter's bag that first morning, we found nothing. Absolutely nothing.

That's when the fear really set in. The fact that a young girl had just disappeared without a trace and no one knew what had happened to her, like something had just swallowed her up. Everyone was watching their kids like a hawk; they still are. No child within a two-hundred-mile radius of the place is allowed to walk to school. People on the farms have organised rosters to pick up their kids and drive them into town every morning. No more riding their bikes. Even kids who only live a couple of doors away from the school have to walk there in a group or with a parent. I'm glad my grandkids

are just about grown up. The fear must be something awful if you've got young ones. And the poor kids. What's being a kid if you don't have a bit of freedom to muck about?



Four weeks have passed since Janet's disappearance and Ted McClymont still hasn't gone back to work. Lucky for him he works for a government department, because anywhere else and who knows what they'd be living on.

Ted hasn't accepted that Janet's dead; at least that's what he says. 'I've not given up hope, not by a long shot,' he shoots back at anyone who tells him how sorry they are about what's happened to Janet. He has this awful grin smeared across his face like a scrape of dough. His lips all twisted and baring his teeth. Mind you, when he thinks no one is watching, his mask drops away and something horrific happens to his eyes. It's as if he's watching his daughter being tormented with the worst things he can imagine.

Barbara, though, she knows her daughter's gone for good. She staggers about as if she's carrying Janet's corpse in her arms. She was a striking-looking woman, was Barbara, even though she dressed in a pretty peculiar way. Bohemian, I guess you'd call it. That's what Dot says. Hair all piled on top of her head, some bloody great pin or scarf securing the lot of it. I don't think I ever saw her in what I would call normal get-up. She was always going about in caftans and harem pants like that woman out of *I Dream of Jeannie*, her hands stained with paint.

Now of course, well, it's a different story. Poor woman. She looks terrible. I'm not saying that to be unkind, but hell's

bells she's thin. From what I can see, she barely changes her clothes, just wanders around in what looks like a pair of Ted's old trousers and a T-shirt.

The women tried to keep Barbara and Ted fed at first. Dot and Jean Creadie and Connie Tranter and a few others would drop off casseroles at the house for them. Barbara was hardly ever there. Always trudging about in the cane, looking for Janet's body. Even when she was at home, more often than not she wouldn't answer the door. People left the food on the doorstep—spaghetti Bolognese, salmon loaf, sweet and sour pork. There were buckets of the stuff going off in the sun. All that trouble people went to going to waste. Ted eventually hosed out the dishes and left the empty pots and Tupperware containers at the gate to be picked up by whoever owned them. Not that anyone holds it against them. People can't be held to account for such things when they're grieving.

Some people say it'd be easier for Barbara and Ted if they knew exactly what happened to their girl; that what they imagine has to be worse than the reality. I don't reckon that's right. If it was my daughter, I wouldn't want to know. Not the details. There are men who are capable of anything; blokes whose instincts when they have something or someone in their power go beyond what decent people can imagine. If the McClymonts asked my advice, I'd tell them to accept that their daughter's gone, rage and howl for a while, and then settle quietly into their grief. It's what I would do.

But if those detectives from down south ever do catch that bastard who killed Janet—if they're lucky enough to trip over him and he holds up his hands and says, 'Yep, it was

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me' (because they're that bloody useless it would be the only way they'd find him)—then they should tie that black-hearted bastard to a tree, give Ted McClymont a cane cutter, and walk away. A few swings of that hooked blade and he'd be crying like a baby; crying like Janet would have been.