

CODES AND LIARS, LOVERS AND CROOKS

# Deception Bay

'Enthralling and intriguing,  
a finely layered murder  
mystery.' —Mirandi Riwoe



J.P. Powell

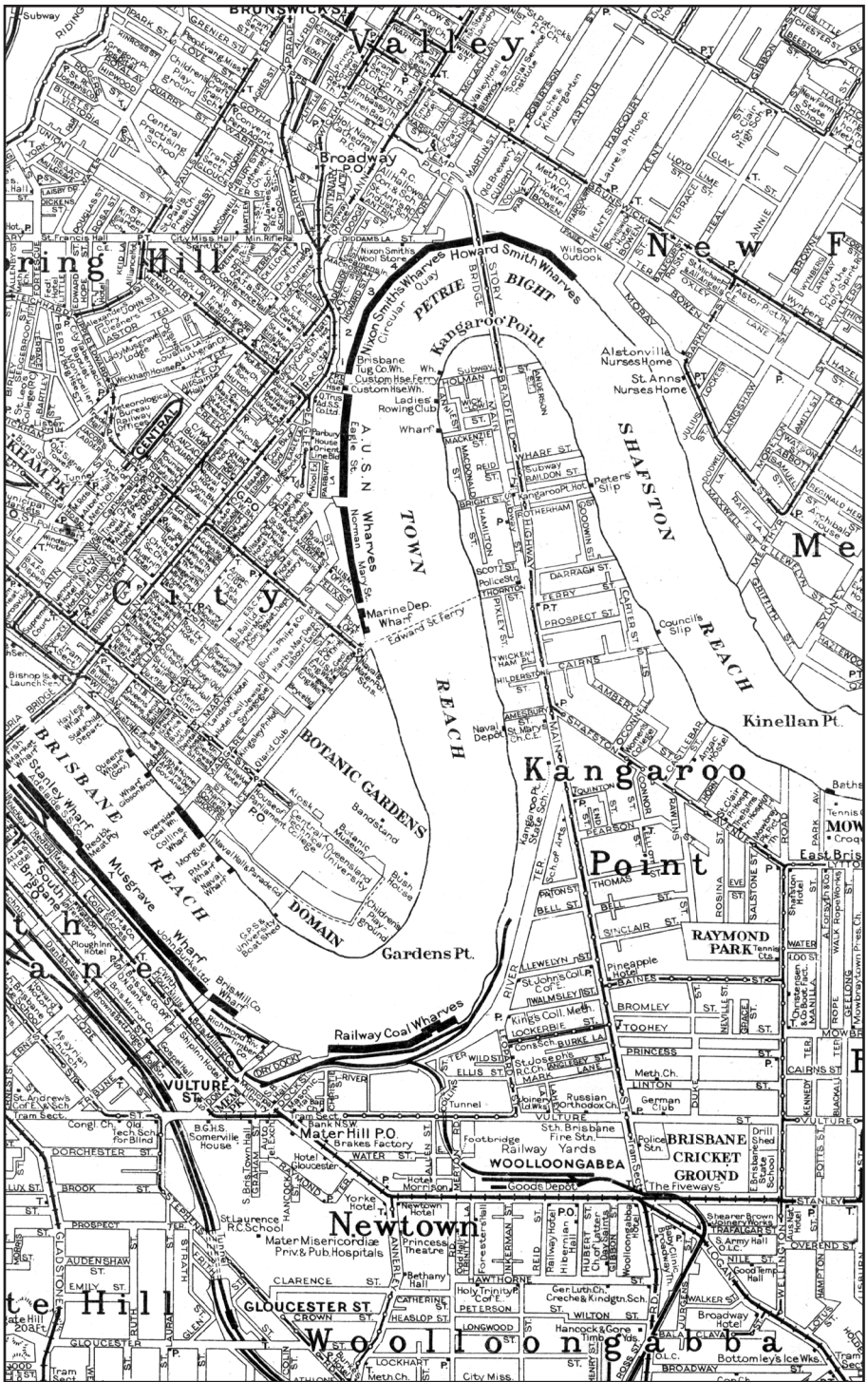
# Deception Bay

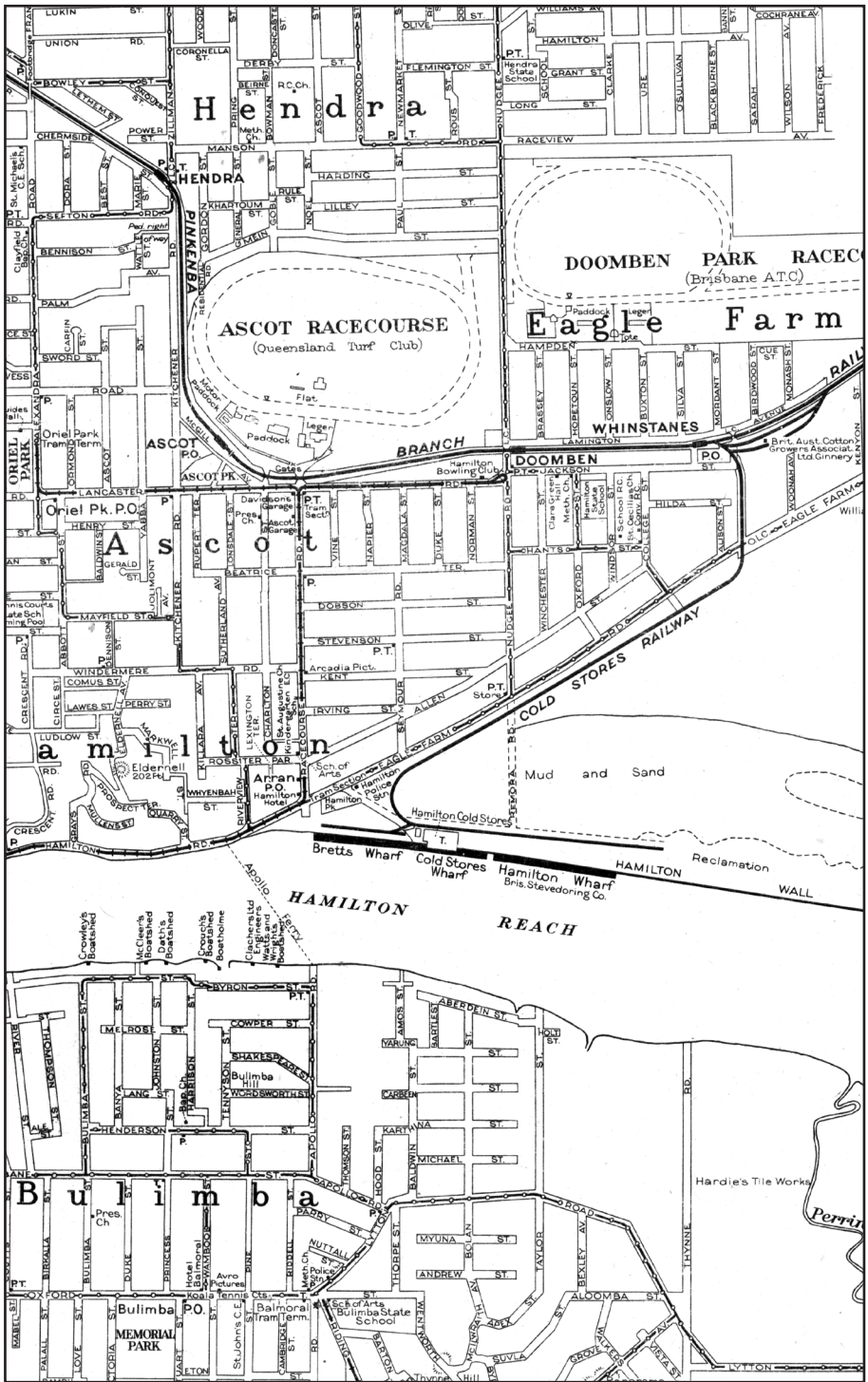
J.P. Powell

 **brio**  
BOOKS









THURSDAY 27 APRIL 1944

## Prologue

The night was moonless. A black sky pierced only by the rhythmic sweep of searchlights mounted on hills to the west. The overlapping funnels of light crisscrossed, sliding over the cupola of the City Hall, the metal spines and white arches of the two bridges. Details emerged briefly, half-realised shapes and patterns appeared one moment, only to be swallowed up the next. The light flickered over people and places. Nothing was solid, nothing certain; events played out in a world of shadows.

The light lingered on the figure of a man seated on the sandstone balustrade of the Shrine of Remembrance. A thin-limbed man in ill-fitting civilian clothes, he sat alone, a briefcase wedged between his feet. His skin appeared translucent, his blond hair luminous in the flickering of the Eternal Flame. For weeks now, Archie had come to sit and watch, entertained and thrilled by the show that evolved around him.

He knew the regulars by now, the soldiers who congregated most nights, the locals who joined them. Adolescent boys venturing out to gape wide-eyed at this forbidden show.

Gypsy — a lieutenant with the Marines — leaned against a column singing bawdy songs in a deep bass that jarred with her face powder and paint. Ruby — an Australian warrant officer — danced to the music in a tight-fitting dress, her glossy wig and painted nails reflecting the light as she circled. Tondelayo wasn't here tonight; perhaps she was on duty, although she might yet turn up. The night was young. The regulars waited for soldiers, groups of men who staggered past, giving ironic salutes with their tall bottles before hot footing it to the railway station or the sly grog shops in Spring Hill. But there was always one. One who'd stay. TBH, Gypsy called them: 'to be had'. Archie laughed to himself — there's an acronym for everything now we're at war.

Every night, Archie watched, slowly learning how a glance, a movement of the hand, just a simple gesture sent a message. He had learned the codes, the secrets shared by those who spoke the same language. It excited him. He had lived for so long in what had seemed a prison but now, in the shadows, he could see how fluid his future might be.

Soon, one of the passing soldiers would pause, glance around to check that his friends had gone.

'Hey babe,' Ruby would purr, tapping the seat beside her. 'Where've you been, honey? Sit by me a while.'

And the soldier — none different — would join Ruby on the hard stone balustrade, would lean into her embrace, his face alive in ways Archie had seldom seen elsewhere.

From the shadows of the colonnade, Archie watched a small group of soldiers roasting sausages over the remembrance flame. One slung his arm around the soldier with the toasting fork. A third sat on the ledge of the nearby rotunda, a cigarette held to his mouth. He blew smoke rings toward the others, ending with a kiss. More than anything, Archie



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wanted to join them, to emulate their casual ease, the way they seemed comfortable in their own skin.

Briefly he thought of his wife and prayed she was safe.

He had meant to go back to work, it's what he'd told them when he left the party. But already today he'd spent sixteen long hours at his desk, staring at letters and digits, tracking them down columns and across parallel lines. Lists, lines, grids, patterns. Groups of letters, four to each group, hammered into his brain. Letters swam before his eyes even now, so that he felt he was drowning in them.

Nothing made any sense. A riddle, he knows, always has a solution, but sometimes — and he knows this too — the answer comes when you least expect it. When, instead of staring intently, you look away. Then the clue comes as if from nowhere and instantly you have it: the solution. But you must wait for that moment, never force it. As a child, he played with the thermometers his father brought home from the lab, breaking them open to extract the mercury, watching as the tiny bubble of silvery grey emerged, so elusive that when he reached out to touch it, it burst into tiny balls. No matter how hard you tried, it was impossible to pin it down, but then, all of a sudden, it would meld into a single blob once more. Solutions, too, were like quicksilver.

The Japanese Mainline Army messages he was working on were meaningless now, of course. He knew the additives had changed — they were old. Messages about weather systems that had blown themselves out months ago, battles long fought and lost, troops already redeployed. But there was something to be said for playing with the puzzle, investigating the minds behind it, their way of thinking. Was it super-encrypted? Bisected? Often it seemed as though he was playing a game, complex and cerebral, but just a game. And then something would happen — a freighter sunk off Newcastle, a barge

landing a company of marines on the wrong beach — and you remembered it might be a game, yes, but a deadly one.

He knew he wouldn't sleep.

For months he'd told himself he wanted nothing to do with this world, but its allure was more than he could resist, and he'd strayed around the edges for too long.

One of the soldiers, the one holding the fork in his hand, shone a torch with his other into the shadows where the he sat watching.

'Who's there?' the soldier said. 'Come on, join our little party, why don't you? We won't bite.'

Archie stood. As he moved to join the group, he felt his body relax, his skin loosen as if, finally, he was sloughing off a hard and itchy coat.

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Across the river, on the south side, Harry Latimer was lost.

Even if he'd known his way, even if he hadn't arrived but a day ago and had scarcely settled into camp, even if he hadn't been drinking for the last six hours, Private Harry Latimer of the 832nd Signal Service Company would have been lost. The shadows cast by the searchlights, the meandering alleys and unlit streets made retracing his steps impossible, like finding his way through a dark maze. The street was unpaved, the surface gravelled. He slipped on the wet gutter at the edge of the sidewalk and clutched the brown-paper wrapping in his left fist, struggling to keep the bottle upright. He took a swig from the narrow mouth, but the movement made his head spin, and he wondered where he was and how he'd got here. In Brisbane, and lost. Apart from the railway station and the trip to camp bouncing in the back of the troop carrier, he'd seen nothing. Nothing apart from this river, the ramshackle

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buildings straddling it, and the men he'd met up with a few hours ago.

He wiped his hand across his mouth and tasted blood. Then remembered the skating rink, the girls, the fight. What had it been about?

In the distance, he saw crowds milling. If he could only work out how to navigate there, he'd be able to ask the way back to camp. But no cars passed at this time of night and, although he'd seen metal rails down the middle of the road, he hadn't seen any streetcars and had no idea if taxis worked this late.

The illuminated dial on his wristwatch showed half past twelve.

As he wove along a laneway, he could make out the iron semicircular arches of a bridge across the river; if he kept to the riverbank, surely he'd make his way there. He heard distant laughter, a ribald song, a shriek of what might have been joy. Or fear.

Harry leaned against the wooden palings of a fence, took another mouthful of the sour beer, then hurled the bottle onto the road. The paper bag dulled the shatter of glass. He raised himself up, spat onto the dirt, and made for the bridge. From this distance the press of people on the bridge formed a single swirling mass of movement and colour.

The laneway gave on to a wider street and finally he found himself among the crowds lining the road. People jostled for space as they funnelled toward the bridge. Groups of GIs huddled together or roughed each other up like puppies at play. Women in shimmering dresses clung to the arms of sailors in bell-bottomed trousers, while girls in short skirts and bobby socks alternately stared open-mouthed or giggled into the palms of their splayed hands.

'Hey babe, gimme a kiss.'

‘Keep your hands off me. Why would I kiss a brewery when there’s whiskey to be had?’

‘Hitler . . . he’s only got one ball . . .’ A solitary tenor rose in song.

‘Here we go, girls, come and get it.’

Harry looked into the bloodshot eyes of a captain who stared back without seeing. One of the captain’s hands pawed the crumpled blouse of a woman beside him, and the other was clasped firmly around her waist, as if to keep them both from falling.

Above, the searchlights lit up the clouds and Harry looked ahead. For a brief moment, the light slid across the metal arcs of the bridge and he watched the beam caress two figures, a soldier and a woman. The way they moved reminded him of the couple at the skating rink, he a short soldier and she statuesque. Earlier in the night, he’d watched as they sailed around in beautiful harmony, bewitched by their skill, in spite of the man’s awkward stoop. When he walked around the rink he limped, hunched over, but once on the skating rink he flowed with grace. Now, he saw the two figures part. The woman was soon lost in the crowd but the soldier moved awkwardly to the iron railing of the bridge and leapt up. He balanced there, arms held up to the sky in silhouette. Harry watched as the silhouette seemed to dissolve and the figure began to teeter. It faltered and toppled. For a few seconds, one hand gripped the railing, and the legs — surprisingly long and spindly — cycled in the air.

Harry raced ahead, hollering.

‘Hey!’ His voice was lost among the revellers. ‘Help. Look. Help me get to him.’

A woman’s high-pitched cry pierced the laughter, and two GIs wrestled each other to the ground. Harry ran toward the centre of the bridge, stepping around the soldiers, crushing



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a cap underfoot. As he ran he swooped to retrieve a fallen corsage of brightly coloured flowers and returned it to the woman.

‘Ma’am,’ he said and kept running.

The man was gone without a sound. Harry made his way to the spot where he’d been and leaned over the railing, searching the river. Nothing. No swirl of oily waters. No hand waving for help. It was as if he’d imagined it all, and he wondered if he had.

## Chapter One

The late-night shift was unusually quiet. Most of the drunks who'd been hauled in around midnight were sleeping it off in the cells out back and the MPs who'd dragged them in were doing much the same in the upstairs mess. The blackout curtains blocked any light from escaping to the darkened streets below. Only muffled clangs from the dry docks and the rumble of a solitary truck gave any hint that workers toiled throughout the night.

Alone at his desk on the upper floor of South Brisbane Town Hall, Sergeant Joe Washington drummed a slow bongo rhythm on the wooden surface with the fingers and palm of his hand. He looked toward Major Mitchell's desk on the raised platform at the end of the room. Apart from the framed photo of his wife and that damn dog, the desk was, as usual, bare of paperwork or any other sign of activity. Mitchell was too senior to let night shifts interfere with his evenings.

Joe lifted a fistful of pencils from the jar to his right and laid them out in a line. From both ends of the row, he selected a pencil and laid each of them on top of the others to form

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a second layer. One by one, he continued lifting pencils and placing them on top of each other until he had built a neat triangular structure. He leaned forward, squinting slightly, and reached for a wooden ruler. Onto the top of the triangle, he balanced the ruler, checked that the whole structure was sturdy and tapped on one end. He watched the ruler seesaw from side to side. He tapped a second time and began to count. Suddenly, he was back in the playground on Coney Island, he could smell the salt from the sea and taste the sweetness of the vanilla ice cream bought from the fat man with a rainbow-coloured hat. And he remembered the crippling embarrassment of having his mother — a short, squat woman in a dowdy black dress — partner him on the opposite end of the seesaw.

He toppled the pyramid and tossed the ruler across the room.

Today's *Courier-Mail* lay open underneath the scattered pencils. RAF bombers over Europe, the Reds marching into Crimea, Liberator bombers hammering Truk. Bodies washed up on sandy beaches, battleships blown apart by fearsome pilots, merchant ships sunk along the coast — sixteen vessels lost last year and the threat remained. The war was going well — people said so all the time — the end was in sight. But the numbers of casualties continued to rise and Joe wondered what the final cost would be.

Turning the pages in search of better news, Joe noticed another pet parade was imminent. A regular event at the Riverview Hotel, he loved photographing soldiers with their pets, burly sergeants fussing over dogs as they groomed them before the show — last time he even saw the fierce quartermaster from Base soothing a tabby cat cradled in his arms. The parade showed men at their best, Joe thought. It certainly made a change from the things he dealt with most days.

He lifted a stack of folders and slammed them on top of the

newspaper. He pushed his glasses up onto his forehead, ran his fingers through his closely cropped sandy hair, then inspected his arms as he lay them crossed one over the other on top of the pile. His clipped nails were stained purple from constantly handling carbon paper, the colour seeping like bruises into the roughened patches of skin where he'd chewed his cuticles. He spread his hands to form two fans. This was all he had to show for his time in the United States Army. Not exactly a Million Dollar Wound.

Joe Washington was twenty-four and acutely aware that two of these years had been spent at this desk.

Which folder to choose tonight? He flipped through them like a pack of cards. The brawl near the submarine base at Teneriffe that had ended with two sappers in hospital? Yesterday's report of an attack on a woman at Gympie? Perhaps the dope peddler? Sydney had alerted them to a Jimmy Kwan who had moved north with an entertainment troupe, but they had nothing specific on him. There'd been rumours of opium dealing for some time now, opium sticks being almost as lucrative as smuggled cigarettes. Unlike booze, that particular addiction seemed not to end in brawls. He selected another folder. The impersonator? Joe couldn't see the attraction himself, but each to his own. Didn't seem much of a crime to him, trying to pass yourself off as an officer. More a bit of light comedy.

He leaned back, folded his arms, and looked at the ceiling. Everyone said the war was moving on, it was time to look to the future. *Position* yourself.

But what could Joe do? Over the last two years he'd got used to this life, a life that had seemed so strange when he'd arrived. Now, it felt impossible to imagine another. Perhaps he could work something out, *position* himself for a future. Whatever that might be.



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Did he have the nerve for action? Hell, even Bland had managed a transfer north. Joe tried to imagine him in action, but the image wouldn't form. Private Wilbur Bland, short and overweight, the butt of everyone's jokes. Yet even Bland had found a way to serve that was more like a soldier than a clerk. At least he'd got nearer the action.

Joe reached forward to straighten the photo frame on his desk: New York in light and shade. He'd shot this scene in Central Park on a winter evening after heavy snowfall. The trees blotched with snow, icicles strung along their branches like Christmas lights. The black-and-white geometry appealed to him, the monochrome patterns of winter when everything was bleached of colour. But the photo wasn't just about winter. As Joe had lined up the shot, taking care to record the precise lines, he knew that in a few months these trees would be transformed into colour, the geometric shapes would soften as flowers bloomed and green shoots appeared. The scene was one of promise.

When the phone trilled, Joe was startled to find himself again in Brisbane.

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Twenty minutes later, Joe leaned across the front counter at the Woolloongabba Police Station and caught a whiff of something sour. The Woolloongabba Police were responsible for the whole of the South Brisbane Police District, an area that covered most of this side of the river and as far south as Coolangatta. The bars, nightclubs and entertainment venues that crowded into South Brisbane meant that Joe had regular dealings with police here. Next door to the station, a park and playground run by the Police Welfare Club had all sorts of facilities, too. Some of the men at Base came here to play

basketball, and Joe himself had tried his hand in the boxing ring once, with a group of raggedly dressed kids from the district. Thinking to go soft on them at first, he'd soon realised he'd have the crap beaten out of him if he didn't fight for real. Street kids were as tough here as back home, it seemed.

'Evening, constable.'

He addressed himself to the uniformed officer slouched in a chair behind the counter and watched as the constable picked his teeth with a broken match, flicked whatever he'd discovered in there onto the floor and then flung the match into a wastepaper basket across the room.

'I gather you've got a body,' Joe said.

'Might have. Or we will when the water police get out in a couple of hours. Unless your man's hallucinating — and that's possible, given the state of him when he stumbled in here. Totally shickered.'

'He's not my man yet. Not till you've finished with him,' Joe said.

'Well, you're here now,' the constable replied.

'What's his story?'

The constable stood, reached for a sheet of paper and walked to the counter. He pushed the paper across to Joe. 'Private Harry Latimer, 837th Signal Service at Camp Ascot. Reckons he saw someone fall off the Victoria Bridge, sometime after midnight.'

'Did he jump or was he pushed?'

'Good question and I've no idea. Latimer was pissed as a newt, threw up at the counter here and the whole place stinks like a public bar at closing. Even after we got the new recruit to slop it out. There'll be hell to pay when Mrs Mortimer arrives in a few hours.'

So, that explained the rancid smell.

'Your soldier's only been in town a day,' the constable

continued. 'Reckons he doesn't know his way around and only ended up here because he ran into the Sarge who brought him back for a cuppa and a few questions.'

The constable tilted his head to where Joe noticed a second officer at the back of the room. The sergeant was sipping from a large enamel mug that he lifted by way of greeting.

'So, he's still not mine,' Joe said.

'Well, there's no crime scene as far as anyone can tell, or not yet. He's not exactly our responsibility either. You want to see him?'

'Guess so,' Joe said. 'Better show me.'

The constable swung open the counter to let Joe through. Joe followed through the room and into a corridor that led toward the back of the station. At the end of the corridor, the constable opened a door on the right and leaned in.

'Sarge here to see you now,' he said to the man inside, before he turned to Joe. 'Watch out for the bucket.'

'Any chance of a coffee?' Joe asked.

'A cup of tea will have to do.'

'Leave it,' Joe said. 'But thanks.'

They parted and Joe took in the scene before him.

A dishevelled private in a grimy uniform sat slumped in a chair facing the door, his head laid on arms sprawled across the pine table. Joe wondered if the man was asleep.

'Private Latimer,' he said.

Joe watched the private shake himself awake and look up through reddened eyes. Tie askew, hair greasy, face unshaven, he struggled to his feet. Joe checked his watch. It was nearly three in the morning and the man had been here how long?

'Sir,' the man said. 'Private Latimer, sir.'

'Sit down before you fall,' Joe replied. He pulled out a metal chair that squealed along the floor and took care not to knock the bucket as he sat.

The private grimaced at the noise and fell back into his chair.

‘Why’d they call the MPs?’ he asked.

‘Sergeant Joseph Washington, Criminal Investigation Division,’ Joe said. ‘Pleased to meet you too.’

‘Crime? There ain’t no crime. I just saw an accident, that’s all. Thought I should report it, but if I’d known I’d be holed up here all night, I’d have reconsidered.’

‘You with the 837th?’ Joe asked.

‘No, 832nd Signal Service Company. Army Pictorial Service, Photo Unit 1.’

‘Didn’t know we had one,’ Joe said.

‘We’ve transferred up here to work on some new radio-phone the general’s got installed. Sends photos by radio wave, pretty nifty,’ Latimer said.

‘So, you haven’t been here long?’

‘Got in yesterday, off the train from Sydney. That’s a hel-luva trip, I gotta say. Who knew this country was so big? After we got dumped at camp, I thought I’d check out the town, just to celebrate being in a new place, you know. And getting off that God awful train. I found a couple of others who’re with GHQ Detachment 3, and they’d been here long enough to know their way around. So, I tagged along. We ended up at some sort of skating rink, somewhere not far from the river.’

‘The Blue Moon,’ Joe said. ‘I know it. So, you didn’t stay with the others?’

‘They’ve got girlfriends, didn’t want company all night, I guess. They went off and left me drinking alone, till I got thrown out after midnight, that is. I didn’t know where I was, but I thought if I followed the river, I might recognise something, get back to where we’d started.’

‘And did you? Where did you start?’



‘The bridge. We’d walked across it earlier, that bridge made of metalwork with fancy arches. But by the time I’d left the skating rink, I’d drunk a fair bit of wine. No one told me the streetcars wouldn’t be running. I looked around for a cab but there weren’t any. I was heading back to the road across the bridge. There were so many people you could hardly move, but I saw this group of people. I thought I recognised a couple from the skating rink — they knew how to dance with skates on, made a big show of it.’

‘All civilians?’

‘Mostly.’

‘So, what happened?’

‘People were singing or brawling, but there was this one man. He must have climbed onto the railing, no idea why. There were lots of people around, all of them making a racket but not taking too much notice of anything. No one seemed to be watching him.’

‘Go on.’

‘I got closer and, I don’t know, he looked pretty drunk, not happy drunk like all the others. You know? Something didn’t seem right. When I got up close he must have lost his footing and all of a sudden he disappeared. He must have slipped. One minute he was there, standing on the railing and reaching up to the sky, and the next he was gone. I raced over to where he’d been and looked down but there was nothing. No splash. Not even a ripple.’

‘What about the others? The group you saw on the bridge? Didn’t they yell out? Did you?’

‘Course I did, but there was a group of GIs fighting and the girls were too busy goading them, egging them on. No one else saw anything.’

‘Anything else you can tell me about the man? Height? Build?’

'No. Nothing special. I thought at first he looked like someone I'd seen earlier.'

'Where?'

'At the Blue Moon. There was this couple dancing. I thought maybe it was him. But honest to God I've been going over and over it. I just don't know.'

The private looked directly into Joe's face and shook his head as if to loosen something. 'Do you think maybe I imagined it all?'

'But you reported it?' Joe shrugged.

'Wish I hadn't, to be honest,' Latimer replied. 'But what could I do? I couldn't do nothing, could I? I couldn't just walk away, it wouldn't have been right. When I saw a policeman, I told him what had happened, more fool me. I didn't think they'd bring me in. I've been here for hours and I've got to be back before I'm reported AWOL.'

'When are you due back?' Joe asked.

'Roll call at eight.'

'Grab your cap and I'll give you a lift.'

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As Latimer settled into the pillion seat, the stench of stale wine and vomit drifted over Joe's shoulder, together with the more familiar aroma of sweaty armpits. Clearly, this was Private Latimer's first time on a motorcycle, Joe thought, as he felt two thin arms encircle his waist and hold on for dear life. Joe remembered his own first ride, the feeling that any minute a whiff of breeze would topple the cycle and blow you over. Only gradually had he learned to lean into the curves, to move with the machine and relax as the motorcycle held to the camber of the road. The war had taught him this skill and now he loved the freedom it gave.

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As they crossed the Story Bridge, the muted lights of the Brisbane Central Wharves flickered on the river below, the ripples of the tide forming eddies of light and shade. Even at this hour — the hour before dawn — groups of soldiers moved in packs. Noisy or quiet, drunk or sober, all of them appeared to roam aimlessly.

Joe felt Latimer's resistance behind him, the man sitting rigidly upright, as they passed the wharves and turned onto Hamilton Drive. Above, a bomber flew low on its way to Eagle Farm and, not for the first time, Joe regretted he'd not learned more about mechanics from his father. For a few childhood years, before his father got sick, Joe had watched in fascination as he pulled apart all manner of engines and electrical contraptions. He'd marvelled at the methodical way his father had arranged the components into neat rows: open-ended spanners from large to small, a stripped-down carburettor set out in precise order as it was dismantled. Weeks later, his father could lay his hand on each piece of the carburettor, knew where every tiny little part belonged, the exact order in which it all came together. But Joe had inherited none of his father's aptitude. He disliked grease and the smell of oil, and even the simplest of objects, a screwdriver or hammer, was fumbled in his fingers until his father lost patience. 'What a schmuk,' he'd say as he reached down to retrieve the fallen objects. 'Here, give it to me.'

If Joe had shown more skill, he might have ended the war fitting out Liberator bombers or servicing Catalinas. The air force had all the glamour jobs. Not to mention the fancy uniforms.

He turned left toward the old racecourse.

Two years ago, Joe had arrived, like Latimer, and camped at Camp Ascot. In those early days, they'd hammered tent poles and posts into ground beaten solid by hundreds of

hooves, but these days, the camp had a more permanent feel. Guard posts at the entrance to the racecourse, workshops and wooden buildings. Movies were screened in the grandstands and a baseball diamond held pride of place in the centre of the field. No one had objected to it all at first, but now, with the war moving north, Brisbane punters complained at the reduced number of race meetings. The only racecourse that remained fully operational was The Creek, just a short distance away. Brisbane certainly loved its racing. Gambling and horseflesh took precedence over almost everything else in this town; celebrity maybe a close second, if the crowds who'd flocked to see John Wayne last year were anything to go by.

At the entrance, Joe pulled up outside the pillars and iron gates. Latimer had unfolded himself from the pillion seat almost before Joe had put the side stand down.

'Thanks,' Latimer said. 'For the lift.'

'Where can I find the CO?'

Latimer frowned. 'What for?'

'Protocol,' Joe said, using a word he knew covered all possibilities.

'That really necessary? The CO won't be here at this time of night. You might find someone in the guardroom but I doubt they'll be interested.'

'I'll be in touch if we need anything more from you,' Joe said. 'Call me if you remember anything. Provost Marshall's office.' As if, he thought with a shrug.

'Sure, Sarge,' Latimer called over his shoulder.

Joe parked the motorcycle and followed Latimer down the main path. He watched the soldier disappear between rows of tents and had a feeling he'd have to speak with him again. Best to leave it for now, though.

Even at this hour there should have been someone on duty, but Joe didn't expect much help. Only a month ago, he'd

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investigated a break-in and attempted rape on Archerfield Road, and when he'd asked around, the commander at Camp Freeman admitted that, except at roll call, he had little idea where his men were any given time of day. At night, it was anyone's guess.

But surely, Joe thought, he should — like Latimer — let someone know what had happened.

The on-duty guard — a military policeman with a five o'clock shadow masking heavy jowls — had been half asleep and was now annoyed at being woken. No one was missing at Camp Ascot, as far as he was concerned, Private Latimer's unit was scheduled to move to their own camp in a day or so, he wasn't responsible for them, and all in all, Joe was left with the impression that the MP's shift had been unnecessarily interrupted by an upstart sergeant with nothing better to do than interfere where he wasn't needed.

'What's it to me if the men are lucky enough to find a decent bed downtown? If they don't turn up for roll call, then we'll take an interest, but at four in the morning, half the camp are somewhere other than in their camp stretchers. You'd be too, if you had a brain. Give us a break.'

Having done his duty, Joe decided to call it a night. He wasn't far from home and could do with a comfortable bed himself. Given his own shift ended in half an hour, he had no pressing reason to return to work. Dawn was not far away and already the sky to the east was lightening.

He left Camp Ascot and turned onto a road that would take him up across the nearby hill and back down to the river. At the top of the hill, he slowed and looked east to where a glow appeared above the horizon. Mansions straddled the ridge line, larger versions of the typical wooden dwellings he'd become used to here in Brisbane, but the width of their verandahs and the intricacy of the ironwork railings suggested wealth, as did

the height and isolation. Money always bought privacy, Joe thought. Secrets behind closed doors were the preserve of the rich; the poor had to hang their dirty linen in the street.

One house caught his eye, its clean lines a contrast to those nearby. He slowed, stood astride the motorcycle, turned off the engine and paused to take it in, relishing the silence of the night. A brick house, simple yet modern, with none of the extravagance of its neighbours. No overhanging roofline, no wide verandah with delicate arches and fussy ironwork details. It possessed five equally spaced windows and, below, a doorway, above which an elegant semi-circular window comprised of circles of glass, was the only decoration. Joe liked it, the simple geometry. He must come back with his camera one day.

From the top of the hill, the brick house looked south over the submarines and messy row of destroyers that Joe knew lined the Hamilton reach of the river. Now, they were just angular shapes with occasional pricks of light as someone lit a cigarette or checked the moorings. Beyond, in the other direction, lay the inky waters of the bay and the eerie white sand hills on the islands offshore. In daylight hours, there'd be a 360-degree view from this highpoint.

A door banged. From inside the house came the sound of music, raised voices and laughter, and Joe watched as men and women, civilian and uniformed, left what must have been a private party.

Two men tumbled onto the street. An American GI and an Australian private, they appeared to be locked in an unfinished argument, their voices raised and competing for attention. Joe couldn't help but overhear.

The Australian pulled away from the American and stood, hands on hips, chin jutting.

'It's dishonest, crooked,' the harsh nasal Australian accent reverberated in the quiet street. 'All this trickery. I joined up



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to fight the Japs, not hide behind that stuff.’

The GI lifted a hand to silence him, but the Australian flung his arms into the air and strode off unsteadily down the hill.

‘Fakes,’ he called back. ‘Camoupanies. That’s who you are. All of you.’

Left behind in the shadows, the GI whispered something.

Joe leaned forward. ‘If only you knew,’ the man said. ‘If only you knew.’

Parked beneath the branches of a large tree. Joe was himself camouflaged in the shadows. Intrigued, he knew he was intruding on a private scene — but hadn’t this become his way of life?

Light streamed from the entrance as a second group of people exited. Joe heard the sound of soft jazz and the clink of bottles. This group milled at the front door, retrieving caps and coats, waving farewell to those who remained inside. Men and women in uniforms — American, Australian, British, Chinese. A tall woman in a blue evening dress, her face elaborately painted, hair piled high, leaned against the door frame. She must have been six feet tall but her dress trailed the ground. Her earrings jingled as she blew kisses into the night, and Joe caught the whiff of expensive perfume.

‘Darlings,’ she drawled in a deep baritone, ‘don’t desert me so soon, the night is but young.’

An Australian soldier embraced her momentarily before turning away.

‘B-shift starts soon and coffee awaits in that cockroach infested kitchen,’ he said, a melodramatic arm raised to his face. ‘Can’t keep Arlington waiting, sweetie.’

‘Adieu, adieu,’ the tall woman said, her voice a deep but ironic simper. ‘Don’t make it too long, Donnie darling. Come again. And again.’

The man raised his cap in farewell and, with a bow to the others, slipped across the gardens and down the street toward camp.

What would an Australian private have to do with Arlington? They run Signals Intelligence, don't they?

Another soldier — British this time — separated from the group. He sucked on a cigarette, made to follow the Australian, then turned angrily toward the tall woman.

'Leave it be, can't you?' he said. He combed his hands through his hair and flung the cigarette to the ground. 'Why must you go on like that?'

He turned in the direction the Australian had taken and cupped his hands to yell: 'Did you hear, Donald? Just leave it be.'

Joe watched two couples crossing the road. One of the women, in AWAS uniform, leaned on the arm of a British major. She looked familiar, but changed. Was it Rose? Rose MacAlister? He recalled their one night together last year and then she was gone, blurred by billowing smoke, shouting farewell through the blast of the train whistle.

Since then, just one letter followed by nothing. It was strange to see her in uniform, but that wasn't all that had changed. Blonde hair in a short bob, flat sensible shoes. Professional now. But he knew what curves lay hidden beneath that shapeless dress, and as the couple passed he gave a low whistle, almost to himself.

She wheeled around to glare in his direction, a haughty expression he recognised. As she was about to call out, the wind rustled the leaves and Joe's cover disappeared. She moved towards him and he made no attempt to retreat into the shadows. When she saw him, she faltered. She stepped closer to double check. Head cocked to one side, her expression softened and she smiled.

## Deception Bay

‘Is that you, Joey?’ she said. She moved alongside his motorcycle and placed a hand on his shoulder. ‘Joey Washington? What brings you to this part of town?’

‘Rose.’ Joe remained seated, his feet steadying the cycle. ‘So, you are back. It’s good to see you.’ He smiled.

‘Yes, I’m back,’ she said.

‘I wondered what you’d been up to. Busy, it seems.’ And he cocked an eye in wry amusement.

Rose turned to where the major stood, somewhat marooned. She gestured for him to join them and linked her arm through his.

‘I’m being rude,’ she said. ‘Major Sullivan, meet Sergeant Joseph Washington. I knew him for a while when I was in Brisbane last year.’

‘Pleased to meet you,’ the major said.

Joe dismounted his motorcycle, stood to salute.

‘Sir.’

They exchanged wary expressions. Close up, Joe inspected the major. Sullivan was tall with a craggy face that made him look crumpled. His hair was tinged a steely grey, his moustache salt and pepper. Far too old for Rose, Joe thought.

Rose stood between them.

‘In uniform, I see,’ Joe said. ‘How did that happen?’

‘I kept going when I left here — kept moving until I got to Melbourne. I ran into someone I used to know, he runs the show up here and persuaded me to join. So, here you see me — all neat and regular in the Australian Women’s Army Service.’ She dropped the major’s arm and twirled, the starched skirt remaining rigidly triangular as she spun.

‘We should get going,’ the major said.

Rose ignored the major, her focus on Joe. ‘What are you doing with yourself?’

‘Same as I was doing last year. Not much has changed in

in my world,' Joe said. 'How's your sister Alma?'

'She made her escape from Brisbane, just disappeared. She'll be safe.'

'Good.'

'What about Frank? Is he still around?'

Joe scoffed. 'Detective Senior Sergeant Frank Bischof you mean. He's not likely going anywhere. You should be careful.'

'I will,' Rose laughed, a velvety sound that set Joe's skin tingling. 'I'm better at that now. Will I see you around?'

'Maybe.'

'I'm at camp now, with the other girls. Camp Chermside.'

'Not at James's?'

'No,' Rose said. 'His place is rented now.'

'You've had news?'

Rose nodded and turned back to her major, who put his arm protectively around her shoulders. 'A letter arrived, yes. A fellow prisoner somehow got news out, sent a crumpled note to his parents.'

'I'm sorry,' Joe said. And he was.

'It's war,' Rose said. 'There's nothing anyone could have done.'

'Let's go,' the major said again. Rose allowed herself to be led away this time, briefly turning to wave goodbye.

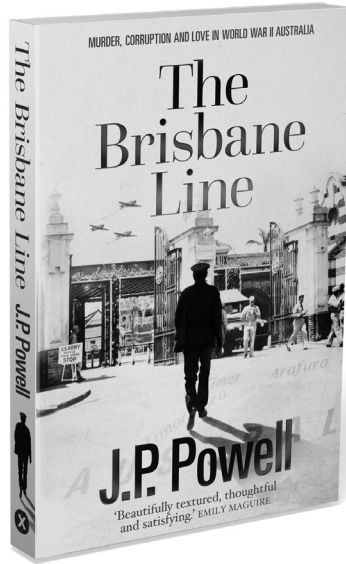
'See you around, Joey,' she said and he watched as the couple rejoined the others.

For a few moments, he sat on his motorcycle and listened to the silence. What a waste, he thought, not sure if he was thinking of James or Rose.

One among so many.

## About the Author

J.P. Powell is an archaeologist and historian with a passion for bringing the past to life. She has worked as a high school teacher, an academic, a National Parks officer, a museum administrator and has excavated in Jordan, Cyprus and Greece as well as leading historical archaeology projects in Australia. In 2017 she was awarded a QANZAC Fellowship by the State Library of Queensland to pursue research into, and writing of, a series of crime novels set in Brisbane during World War II. She lives outside Brisbane.



## The Brisbane Line

As WWII ravages the world and the Japanese Empire has set its sights on Australia, the Americans have come to save us. But not all soldiers are heroes and not all heroes are soldiers.

Sergeant Joe Washington, a criminal investigator with the American Military Police, loves music and photography but spends his days delving into the sordid and petty crimes committed by the thousands of American troops passing through town.

While trying to find stolen gasoline stores, he is sent to investigate the body of an American soldier found dumped in a cemetery. Suddenly Joe is up against notorious detective Frank Bischof. Although ordered to leave the investigation alone, Joe fears that Bischof is protecting the most likely suspect while trying to pin the crime on an innocent – and intriguing – young woman, Rose. A woman who seems to walk between the parallel worlds of black market deals and Brisbane's high society



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**Deceit is usually wrong, sometimes necessary and often the best course of action**

DECEPTION BAY continues JP Powell's magnificent Brisbane wartime saga. American MP Joe Washington, an investigator with the Provost Marshall's Office, and Australian Rose McAlister are swept back together when she returns to join Central Bureau, General MacArthur's code-breaking group of eccentrics in 'Brisbane's Bletchley Park'.

Again and again, Joe is drawn to the Brisbane River. Reports of a man who jumped from a bridge, a code breaker allegedly drowned by suicide, and an arm with an unrecognisable tattoo fished out of the water at the submarine base.

Together they follow the clues but are quickly drawn into the city's dark tank stream, filled with predators and conmen and Joe's nemesis, corrupt Queensland detective Frank Bischof.

*'Deception Bay reads like a compulsive thriller yet is adorned with an effortless and often breathtaking evocation of a lost Brisbane city. With The Brisbane Line and now Deception Bay, Powell has built two mighty additions to the city's literary canon.'* — Matt Condon

*'Enthralling and intriguing, Deception Bay is a finely layered murder mystery. Immaculately researched and full of great detail, Powell's work depicts a fascinating side of Brisbane in WWII.'* — Mirandi Riwoe

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