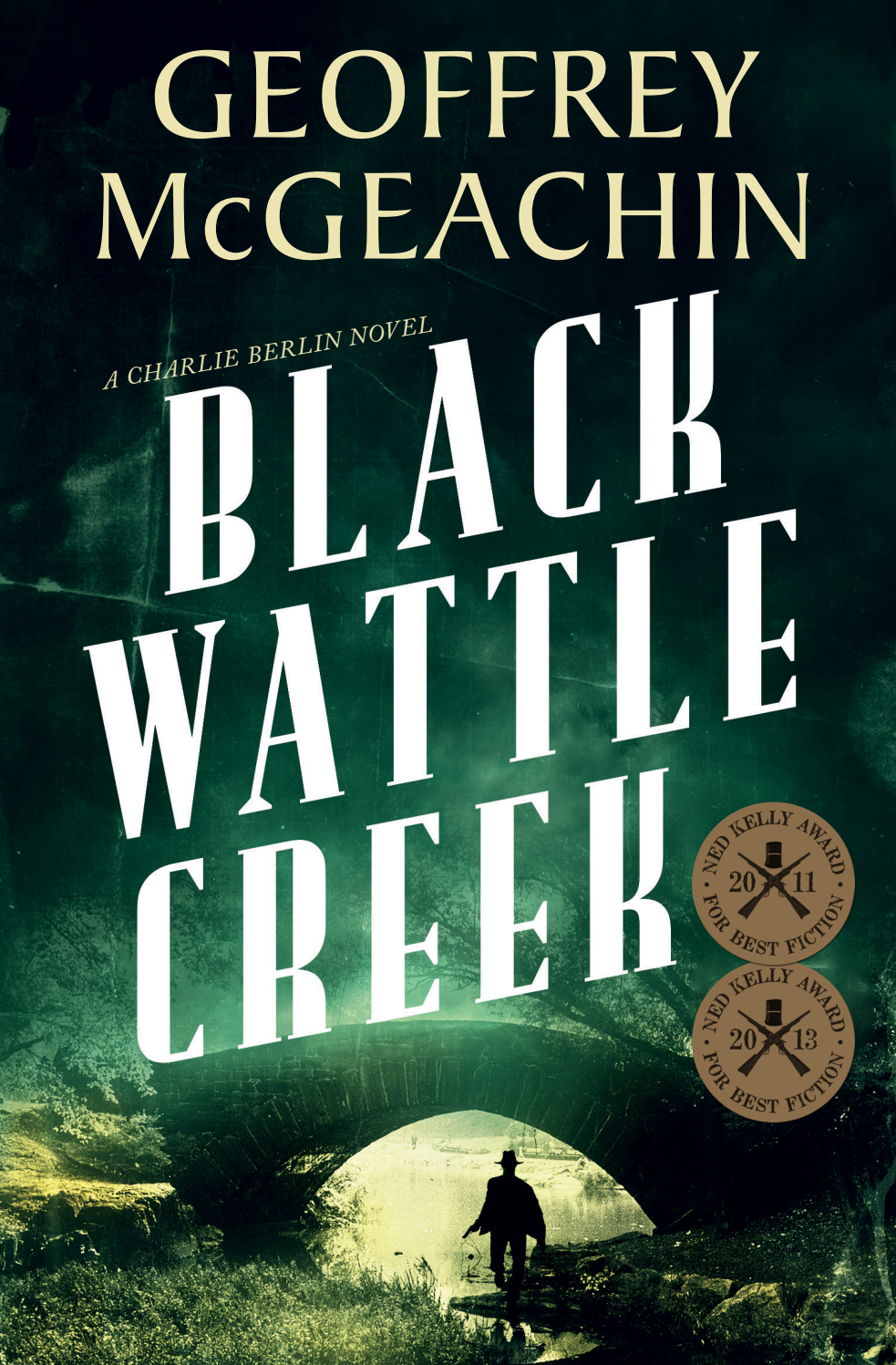
GEOFFREY McGEACHIN

A CHARLIE BERLIN NOVEL

BLACK WATTLE CREEK



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brio
BOOKS

ONE

If you have to die, Melbourne is a fair enough place to do it and September is one of the better months for a funeral. Still early spring, no hint yet of the desiccating ugliness of summer, still chilly and almost always bleak enough for a suitably sombre air to blanket the proceedings. The downside to a September funeral is if you time your dying wrong you'll never know who won the Aussie Rules grand final. And in football-mad Melbourne, that can be a fate worse than death.

The sun broke through the overcast for a brief moment, a narrow shaft of bright, winter-cool morning light beaming down through a high window in the Moonee Ponds church. The splash of light illuminated a row of medals that had been placed on top of the coffin along with an army officer's cap. It also lit up a hand-knitted, navy-blue-and-white-striped woollen scarf. The scarf informed the few in the congregation who didn't already know that the man inside the coffin had been a fervent Geelong supporter. The grand final was just two days away and the Cats were at the very bottom of the 1957 League table. With your team the Wooden Spooners a man might as well be dead.

There were more medals on show throughout the church. A dozen or so men wore them on the left breast of their nearly identical black suits or dark overcoats, with others displaying

more subtle rows of coloured ribbons. The medals clanked together as the congregation rose and sat, and rose and sat again for hymns and homilies and the eulogy. The women in the congregation were in a uniform of sorts too, hats and gloves, scarfs and handbags, heavy overcoats and heavy shoes. It was a good turnout, the minister had noted, his little red-brick church nearly full to capacity.

Pulled from the backs of wardrobes for the occasion, the funeral outfits had been dusted off, mothballs dumped out of pockets, camphor bags set aside. A musty, vaguely chemical odour hung over the mourners, giving the flowers at the altar and the 4711 Eau de Cologne with which the women had dabbed their handkerchiefs a run for their money. Apart from the medal ribbons, the only competition the flowers had in the colour stakes was from a woman in a red overcoat sitting in the front row.

She was a looker, that was for sure. Thirtyish, but only just, and tall. Slim too, with dark, lustrous hair washing over the collar of her coat. Outside the church, before the service, that red overcoat had drawn pursed lips and tut-tutting from a number of the women. The coat was cut well and showed she had hips under it as well as a respectable chest. Several of the men managed to pull their eyes away from her chest and check out her left hand. Under the tight, elegant black-leather glove a bulge on the third finger indicated a wedding ring. The unmarried men were disappointed, as were a number who were attending the funeral with their wives.

Inside the church the woman took off her gloves. She was seated next to the widow, holding her hand. Skin to skin, warmth, a touch that says you are still alive and that somebody cares. The widow stared straight ahead, head tilted to one side. She seemed numb, distant, and had to be gently coaxed into rising for the prayers and hymns. Once up on

her feet she stared blankly at the hymnal her companion held open for her.

At the end of the service the undertaker quietly marshalled the six men, all medal wearers, who would carry the coffin out to the hearse. He took the officer's cap from the top of the coffin, turned it over and placed the medals inside, with the football scarf folded neatly on top. Crossing the church to the front row of pews he bowed slightly and handed the cap to the widow. She stared up at him, confused, and then recognition slowly showed in her face. And anger. She stood up.

'It's not right, you bastard, it's not right.'

The organist had momentarily stopped playing, flipping pages to find the recessional, and in that brief period of respectful silence the widow's words echoed round the church walls, followed by shocked gasps from the congregation. The startled undertaker flinched, stepped back, hands out as if to protect himself from physical attack. He turned around, jaw clenched, and walked stiffly back to the coffin and the waiting pallbearers. The widow slumped down onto the pew, dropping her head on the shoulder of the woman in the red overcoat. She started to cry and the woman stroked her hair. The widow leaned closer, whispering in the woman's ear, telling her the awful secret.

TWO

The constant click-clack click-clack of steel wheels on iron rails had settled back into Charlie Berlin's consciousness. By now they must be out of the Reich and deep into Poland, putting the train well beyond reach of the RAF's night bombing and the Americans' daylight air raids. The windows in the cramped compartment were painted black, as were those lining the corridor of the carriage, so it was hard to tell if it was day or night.

The elderly German sergeant sleeping opposite Berlin was slumped against the window to the train corridor. The man's head was back, mouth open, and as he snored and snorted, saliva bubbled in the corner of his mouth. A machine pistol lay on the seat next to him and the American B17 waist gunner was looking at it. He glanced nervously across at Berlin, who shook his head gently from side to side. He could hear the other two soldiers who made up their guard detail chatting in the corridor outside, both still wide awake and armed.

There were three other men in the compartment — a second B17 waist gunner, an RAF flight engineer, and a wild-eyed and constantly shaking tail gunner who had been blasted out of a Halifax somewhere over Holland. Berlin hadn't met many tail gunners at the interrogation centre in Frankfurt — Tail End Charlies had the shortest lifespan of all the RAF

aircrew. Cut off from the rest of the crew by the length of the bomber and the primary target of night fighters attacking from the stern, a tail gunner had a lonely and terrifying job. Probably even worse than being the pilot, Berlin decided, if that was possible.

Berlin and his crew had taken the war and their RAF Lancaster bomber deep into Hitler's Europe twenty-nine times. Berlin's men — four Poms, a Canadian and a Glaswegian — had decided early on that the young Australian pilot was crazy, but he was committed to an objective they all agreed on: to get them there and back quickly and safely, no matter what it took, and to get them to the magic number, thirty. Thirty completed missions would allow them to be rated Tour Expired, and end combat for them. Thirty was the charm, and as the missions mounted some began to secretly think that perhaps they had it in the bag.

But over the docks at Kiel on that final mission, Berlin and his bomber and crew had parted company in a blinding flash that left him all alone, hanging dazed in his parachute harness, suspended from tree branches thirty feet above the ground in a German pine forest.

When the interrogations had finished at Dulag Luft near Frankfurt, the initial destination for captured Allied aircrew, Berlin was released from solitary confinement into the general containment area to await shipping to a POW camp. He kept to himself, as did most of the other RAF men. In the briefings on what to do if shot down and captured, they had been warned there would be microphones recording conversations and English-speaking Germans in RAF and American uniforms mingling casually with the prisoners.

The Americans were different, speaking loudly and asking each other where they were from, which squadron they were with, and how and when their aircraft had been brought

down. Most seemed bewildered or bemused by this twist of fate, unable to comprehend how their heavily armoured bombers flying in tight formation and bristling with multiple 50-calibre machine guns could be shot down. The RAF men had grown used to the heavy losses of night bombing, and Berlin himself was surprised he had made it as far as his thirtieth mission.

He'd carefully searched the faces in the general containment area for any sign of Jock, Wilf, Lou, Gary, Harry or Mick, but found no one. It was the same fruitless search in the camp in Poland. Back in England after the war he finally saw a report that told him the blast that blew him clear and into captivity had also blown his crew into dust and into memory.

There was a long blast from the train whistle and Berlin realised someone had put up the blinds in the compartment. The train shuddered to a stop. Outside on the platform, past the passengers scrambling and pushing to get out, he saw a sign: Pascoe Vale. He looked back around the cramped Victorian Railways second-class compartment, with its centre aisle, lacquered woodwork, bench seats and cigarette butt-littered floor.

The elderly German sergeant opposite was now a snoring clerk with a sauce stain on his wrinkled tie and a brown leather Gladstone bag parked on his lap. The waist gunner with the itchy trigger finger was a middle-aged lady frantically knitting, her face tight and angry. Pink wool spooled relentlessly upwards to her flashing needles out of a string shopping bag at her feet. She glared across the compartment to Berlin's right. He looked around. Next to him a young bloke in overalls stared straight ahead, studiously ignoring the couple to his right, a bodgie in pegged trousers and crepe-soled shoes and his shorthaired widgie girlfriend. The pair were wrestling awkwardly, writhing, grunting, pressed hard up against the

carriage window. Their lips were locked in a kiss that had probably started a half-dozen stations ago at Flinders Street.

Berlin looked away and glanced down. He was wearing his second-best suit and the grey overcoat. Rebecca wanted him to get a new suit but there was no money, his bloody car was seeing to that. Was it a bad car or did he just have a useless mechanic? His shoes at least looked good, he always made sure of that. A good pair of boots had saved his life on the long march through the blizzards of a filthy Polish winter a dozen years ago. Rebecca was right about the suit, but he'd worn worse. He remembered a pair of dark blue RAAF-issue trousers that stank of urine after he pissed himself during an interrogation by the Gestapo, and the threat of a firing squad.

Berlin's grey overcoat had held up well — quality always does. He'd taken it off a black marketeer in a Port Melbourne pub ten years back in exchange for his old RAAF overcoat and a quick smack in the mouth. He'd definitely gotten the better end of that deal. But even quality has its limits and the coat really didn't have another winter in it. He'd have to start saving up for next autumn. The coat held a lot of memories for him, good and bad, and he'd almost convinced himself the faded, rust-like brown stains around the hem were mud and not blood.

The train whistled again. This was his stop, home. How long since he'd had a flashback like that? Was it years? He wouldn't mention it to Rebecca; she had enough on her plate. Besides, he had other news for her, good news, or at least he hoped she would take it that way. He stood up, grabbing onto the brass luggage rack for support. The rust-red, eight-car Tait train shuddered and swayed as it clattered over the level crossing where queues of cars waited on either side of the closed wooden gates. They called these trains Red Rattlers for good reason.

The woman opposite was knitting faster now, mouth set tightly into what Rebecca called a cat's bum, angry eyes fixed on the kissing couple. Perhaps she had a sixteen-year-old daughter, or maybe she was just jealous. Berlin moved toward the door of the compartment, and as the train slowed he tapped the bodgie on the ankle with the toe of his shoe.

The couple broke the clinch and looked up at Berlin. The girl, maybe sixteen but not much more, had bright red lipstick smeared outside her lip line. The boy was sporting long sideburns and oily hair brushed up into a greasy black wave that broke over a pimply forehead. Berlin towered over him. He watched the boy assessing him with his beady rat eyes. What did the little bugger see? The boy grinned and Berlin knew exactly what he was thinking. An old bloke, really old, over thirty maybe, and big, but not that big. Tatty overcoat well out of style and a nose that was broken at some point, probably for sticking it in places where it didn't belong. Like right now.

'You got a problem with something, mate?'

Berlin studied the boy's face carefully before he answered. Bodgie gangs were into pushing and using the amphetamine Benzedrine, but luckily these two didn't look like users. Berlin knew all the signs to look for, and that knowledge came from painful personal experience. He'd had the boy sussed quickly — little rat eyes but not much in the way of rat cunning. All piss and vinegar, as the saying went. And not a very good judge of character either, from the dismissive way he'd just spoken.

'Why don't you give it a rest now, Romeo, maybe give the girl a chance to breathe?'

The girl in question glared up at Berlin and angrily nudged the boy with her shoulder, urging a response, wanting a confrontation. Berlin knew her type too.

The boy sat forward, chin up, responding to the girl's

nudging. 'Oh yeah? Who says so, and why the fuck should I?'

There were gasps from several passengers, shocked at hearing the vilest of obscenities spoken out loud in public. Berlin's right hand clenched involuntarily and made a fist, the muscles and tendons in his right arm tightening up to the bicep and beyond. He wanted so very much to lean down and say, *Because if you don't I'll smash my bloody fist so hard into that dirty little gob of yours I swear you'll have broken teeth coming out of your arsehole for a week.*

Berlin hated the anger that was always lurking just beneath his outwardly calm demeanour. He leaned in closer until his nose and the young hooligan's were almost touching. The smell of Vaseline hair tonic and stale sweat was coming from the boy. Berlin spoke softly, the squeal of the steel wheels on the braking train keeping the words just between the two of them.

'You'll do it because I'm a policeman, sunshine, and because I say so. And you'll watch your mouth in public from now on if you know what's good for you.'

Berlin left the *unless you want a fist in it* part unsaid, but the message was there in his tone. He had piloted a heavy bomber into the lethal night skies over German-occupied Europe with a crew who would jump at his every order, and he knew how to make himself understood.

The bodgie straightened up in his seat. 'Oh, okay, fair enough, if you say so.'

Berlin knew what the boy was thinking: that this would be different if he had a couple of his mates with him, copper or not. And it would also be different, Berlin knew, if he was in the company of some of the older policemen he was acquainted with, men in uniform who would smile at the little twerp and sadly shake their heads; and then haul him bodily from the train by his greasy hair. They'd beat him bloody in

the empty, draughty waiting room, to the silent approval of passengers passing quickly by with their eyes averted.

The train shuddered to a stop and Berlin pulled the heavy sliding door open. As he stepped down onto the platform his nose twitched at the acrid smell of hot brake pads wafting up from under the carriage. A glance back into the compartment showed the knitting woman was still knitting, still angry. As the train pulled away the couple went back to their kissing, the boy casually flipping the policeman a two-fingered salute through the still open carriage door. Berlin watched the train till it was out of sight and he was the last person on the station platform.

The ticket collector was waiting at the gate. Berlin found the return half of the thick cardboard ticket in his coat pocket. As he handed it over, the collector winked and said, 'Thanking you, Squire, have a good evening.'

It was nice to see someone who was happy in their job.

THREE

Berlin crossed the road quickly at the railway gates, stepping between cars slowing down for the bumpy passage over the tracks. Inside the pockets of his overcoat his fists were bunched tight and he could feel the hardness up his arms and across his shoulders and on up into his jaw. The brisk five-minute walk from the station would let him get most of the anger out, or at least force it back down into that dark, dark place where it lived.

The barbershop was shut up tight, as were the newsagency and the chemist. There was the usual gaggle of watchers outside the radio shop, staring at the flickering television screen behind the glass. The Dutchman who owned the shop had rigged up a loudspeaker outside so they could hear as well as see. The set on display was an Admiral, the same as Berlin's. Two hundred quid — what had he and Rebecca been thinking? Berlin's picture was at least as sharp as the set in the window since he'd shelled out the extra money for the good aerial. They'd done it so the kids could watch the live broadcasts of the Olympics, but now, almost a year on, *Zorro* was proving to be the major draw.

Light from Nick's fish and chip shop spilled out onto the pavement on the opposite side of the road. Berlin glanced at his watch — past six, past pub closing time, and it was

Thursday night, pay night. Behind the steam-blotched shop window a mob of drunken, swaying men were shouting their orders in slurred and halting voices, some no doubt cursing the Greek as a bloody wog who should learn to speak bloody English, when he politely asked them to repeat their garbled orders.

Berlin knew many of the newspaper-wrapped bundles would be accidentally dropped in the gutter on the way home, or their contents greedily swallowed only to be vomited up moments later. Some would be left unwrapped and uneaten on kitchen tabletops, fat slowly congealing over battered fish and potato cakes, while angry, bitter men beat their wives bloody in front of frightened children. Thursday nights were hell for coppers too, and Berlin was glad he was a long time out of uniform.

The Chinese takeaway further down the road was also busy, as usual, customers lined up in front of the tiny counter. Young children stood patiently in their pyjamas, dressing-gowns and slippers while their parents waited for aluminium saucepans with colourful lids to be handed back over the counter; steaming pots of fried rice and gleaming sweet and sour pork and overly sweet and sticky lemon chicken.

There wasn't a cat or rat left in the whole suburb a week after the Chinese opened, the story went, but randy toms still pissed on Berlin's gateposts most nights, and his daughter's little terrier Pip still proudly brought them the sleek grey rats he caught behind the tin-and-wire backyard chook shed. The struggle was always noisy and fast and brutal, the chickens squawking and flapping, the rat's necks snapping in the jaws of the snarling terrier as it flung its head from side to side.

The milk bar at the intersection near the bottom of the road was still open. Berlin was the only customer. He bought a box of Cadbury's Milk Tray chocolates for Rebecca and white

paper bags of mixed lollies for the children. Berlin knew what they liked and he led Hildy, the glum-faced teenaged serving girl, on a hunt through the glass jars arrayed along the laminex countertop. Sarah's bag contained milk bottles, cobbers, chewy caramels, pink musk sticks and yellow banana moons while Peter's assortment was more manly: a sherbet bomb, chocolate bullets, red-tipped white lolly cigarettes called Fags, and the rock-hard, aptly named, jaw breakers.

Berlin didn't care much for lollies himself but a showcard for ice cream caught his eye. He was tempted by a dixie cup of vanilla with its little flat wooden scoop, but decided he'd spent too much already. The pay packet was inside his overcoat pocket and he tore the end off and handed the girl a blue five-pound note. He counted the change carefully before slipping it into a trouser pocket. The lolly packets went into his overcoat pockets.

As he turned to leave he saw them. Next to a display case housing sad-looking cream buns and cakes was a locked glass cabinet full of fireworks: sky rockets, Catherine wheels, flower pots, jumping jacks, and red paper-wrapped bungers of varying size, noise-making capability and lethality. Even though Guy Fawkes Night was still six weeks off, local kids had started piling up old timber and other burnable rubbish for a bonfire on the vacant land opposite Berlin's house. Bungers were already popping off at odd hours of the day and night, scaring the neighbourhood pets and destroying the occasional letterbox.

It was definitely time for him to have a word to Peter about firecrackers again. A week earlier Rebecca had shown him the shoebox from under Peter's bed, where a half-dozen red paper-wrapped penny bungers and several packets of Tom Thumb firecrackers were hidden away, tucked under a *Phantom* comic held down with tombolas and cat's eyes and connie agates

from the boy's marble collection. Empire Day last May had brought the usual newspaper reports of burns and blindings and small fingers being blown off little hands that held onto those bright red penny bungers a second too long. Being the policeman living on the street, Berlin expected his son to set an example, but so far that wasn't how things had worked out. Peter was still far from being an out-and-out larrikin but he did seem to be developing a bit of a smart mouth and a knack for finding trouble.

The garage next to the milk bar was closed but Berlin's car was waiting for him, parked in the driveway, key in the ignition. It was perfectly safe like that; everyone knew who the dark blue 1947 Studebaker Champion belonged to. When he opened the driver's door he noticed the interior light was still not working. *Bloody hell, how hard was it to replace a bulb?* He slid into the driver's seat and started the engine. The knocking sound seemed to be gone, *thank God*. The bill for the tune-up was on the passenger seat, neatly folded over. He squinted, straining to read by the feeble street light coming through the side window. *Jesus Christ, had they fitted solid-gold spark plugs?*

As he pulled out of the garage driveway the Studebaker's headlights swept over the mobile X-ray van parked in the empty lot across the road. It had been there several weeks now, long enough for weeds to begin growing up around the wheels. It would be going soon and Rebecca kept urging him to get his chest X-rayed before it left. The government's plan for mass screenings for tuberculosis was aimed at covering everyone in the state, and the mobile vans moved regularly. He decided to get it done while he was on holiday. At least that was bloody free.

He drove down past the primary school, past the darkened buildings and the peppercorn trees lining the low wire fence, and then left and right into his street. A couple of the

widely spaced streetlights were out and he drove slowly, wary of his tyres on the still unmade road. The sewer was due to go in soon and sometime after that disruption the roads would be paved. Berlin wouldn't be holding his breath for all that to happen. The Olympics had used up a lot of money that the State Government could have put into local projects, and things seemed to be going backwards.

The '56 Games were the first time the Olympics had been held outside the Northern Hemisphere and Berlin, like a lot of people, felt the event had the makings of a first-class fiasco. With political infighting, construction delays and cost overruns, the organising committee had even considered moving the Games elsewhere. In the end they went ahead, and to everyone's surprise Melbourne had actually put on a great show. In an atmosphere of continuing international political tension, the highlight to many was the closing ceremony. A local schoolboy had anonymously suggested having all the athletes enter the stadium for the last time, mingling as friends, instead of marching in behind flags in national groups. The idea was a huge success, capping off what everyone was calling the Friendly Games.

Berlin saw none of the friendliness or even any of the events firsthand. Police leave was cancelled, shifts were extended, and he spent all his time hunting down missing, lost, or not-wanting-to-be-found athletes, officials and overseas spectators. All his formal requests for overtime pay or time off in lieu had been rebuffed, but he hadn't let it go and now, today it had finally paid off for him.

Fifty yards on from the corner he made a careful left turn into the driveway. The bare bulb of the porch light glowed yellow, welcoming him home. He was smiling, happy, right up till the moment he switched off the Studebaker's motor. The engine ran on for thirty seconds, coughing and spluttering

until it rattled and finally stopped. He shook his head in the silence. Bugger. He decided to leave the bill in the car till tomorrow and tell Rebecca they hadn't left him one. She'd see through that immediately but probably ignore it, especially when he told her his news. Rebecca knew him better than anyone, probably better than he knew himself. This was both a pain in the backside and, rather perversely, a comfort.

FOUR

The house was a beige and dark brown, three-bedroom, single-storey weatherboard structure with a small front porch and a red concrete-tile roof. After the war a spec builder had littered the street with variations on the same basic design and the residents had used fencing and garden plantings and different coloured paint to give their homes some degree of individuality. Berlin liked to think he was on the way to having the nicest house on the street. Rebecca had a good eye for colour when it came to paint and a magical ability to pick just the right shrub or flower and to plant it in just the right spot for it to thrive. Berlin liked coming home to this little house and to the people it contained.

He let himself in through the gate in the paling fence at the end of the driveway. He'd built that fence himself, and the gate too. It was one of his first attempts at carpentry after they moved in, and not a bad effort. At least it was still standing. In the backyard Pip came running from his kennel down the other side of the house. The kennel was another early woodworking project and so far there had been no complaints from the little brown terrier. Berlin knelt down and patted the dog, rubbing him under the chin and scratching his belly when he rolled over on the grass.

Berlin opened the back door and Pip raced inside, running

between his legs. He reached down quickly to grab for the dog but was instantly entangled with seven-year-old Sarah, arms outstretched for a hug as she chanted, 'Daddy's home, Daddy's home, Daddy's home.' He picked her up and she wrapped one arm around his neck, almost choking him as she searched for the overcoat pocket that held her lollies.

'Kiss first, then lollies.'

She put both arms around his neck and kissed him on the lips with a loud smacking noise. 'You are my favourite daddy of all time.'

Berlin hugged her tightly. The girl smelled of talcum powder and freshly washed hair. *Had he ever been happier in his life?* he wondered. He put her down on the ground and handed over the two white paper bags and the box of chocolates.

'Those chocolates are for your mum, so don't you go opening them. And no lollies for you and Peter till you've finished your tea, you hear me?'

The pyjama-clad girl scampered off with her loot and Berlin unbuttoned his overcoat. There was a row of hooks mounted on the wall near the door to the laundry, above a neat row of gumboots and school shoes in assorted sizes. Berlin made sure his children always had properly fitted shoes and he took great care of them, using the polishes and brushes and cloths he kept in the wooden shoeshine box his brother had made for him before the war. He hung his coat up next to Rebecca's. She was good with clothes, getting the most out of them, and the children always looked well dressed. Her red overcoat was almost as old as his but didn't look it. The coat had been expensive when she bought it, her last indulgence as a single woman. She had worn it to their registry office wedding.

Berlin thought back to the day she had come to his boarding house in Carlton, ten years ago now. It was seven or eight

weeks after they first met, a cop and ex-RAAF pilot, and a journalist and ex-WRAAF photographer thrown together in a country town, both looking for a gang of armed robbers. Berlin for the life of him couldn't understand why she had come to his bed at the Diggers Rest Hotel, or taken him into hers, and now she was telling him he was going to be a dad.

She had framed the news in terms of her father finding himself suddenly in need of buying a shotgun. Being Jewish and a simple country town wedding photographer, he had very little experience of firearms. Perhaps, she had wondered, Berlin could suggest whether he should go for a single or double-barrelled model.

She sat on the bed and told him she'd thought she was unable to have children, after an experience she refused to go into. She also said she didn't actually expect him to marry her if he didn't want to, and hoped he would believe her on that. Berlin pointed out that she wasn't getting any prize in him. He drank too much, had had a run-in with a drug or two, and was a lowly paid copper with a career in a death spiral and a lot of baggage left over from the war. He knew she'd watched him sleeping, writhing and moaning in terror at the things he'd seen and done. She had listened and silently considered his comments. Then, after a pause, she had said, 'Good God, you're right, of course, what was I thinking?' And his heart had dropped as he realised he didn't want to lose her.

She'd laughed at his expression and put a hand to his cheek and said, 'God, Charlie, you are so easy.' Then added, 'But so am I, which I suppose is why we're in this situation.' Then she had that look of casual carnality he'd first seen in his room at the hotel in Wodonga, and they made desperate love on his creaking boarding house bed; and afterwards he formally asked her to marry him and now here they were.

The kitchen was warm from the oven and something

smelled good. Berlin dropped the pay envelope on top of the box of chocolates Sarah had left in the middle of the laminex-topped table. Rebecca looked up from the sink and smiled. She was wearing the blue dress he liked, protected by an apron. He'd come to realise this was the only part of his day he really looked forward to — coming home. He crossed the kitchen and kissed her on the cheek. She kissed him back, hard on the mouth, her tongue flicking quickly between his lips. He liked her way better. He was a little shocked, as he always was when she did that unexpectedly. She smiled at his reaction.

'Welcome home, Mr Berlin. Chocolates and cold hard cash, you certainly know how to get a girl's attention.'

'It's a celebration, I suppose. I've got a week and a bit off, starting now.'

'What?' He could see the sudden concern in her eyes. 'Is there anything wrong, Charlie? Did something happen at work?'

He put a hand on her shoulder. 'Nothing to worry about, Rebecca, everything's fine. I guess they finally just got sick of me asking for my overtime from the Olympics. Chater dumped a pay envelope on my desk and told me to buzz off till Monday week.'

Chater was in charge of the detective squad and 'buzz off' wasn't precisely the term that had been used. Chater had been junior to Berlin before the war but had stayed on, valiantly policing the home front while Berlin was serving overseas, and now he outranked him. The man had a miserable home life with a harping wife and four grasping daughters. He also had an expensive car and an elegant Toorak home no honest copper could afford. Chater was a bloke who regularly disappeared from the office to go to unexplained meetings, and could be found every weekday at one minute past twelve holding up the bar at the nearest pub.

Rebecca picked up the buff-coloured envelope and checked the figures written on the outside. 'Just your regular pay, this week and next week's, nothing extra.'

'You know what they're like in there, Rebecca, tighter than a fish's . . .' He glanced towards the open hallway door '. . . bottom. Nothing I can do about it, but at least I can put the time to good use. I broke a fiver at the milk bar for the lollies and I've kept the change.'

Rebecca dropped the envelope into her apron pocket. 'You deserve some time off but the extra cash would have been better, with the car acting up. How is it, by the way?'

Berlin avoided her eyes. 'Seems to be running okay, I guess. What's for dinner? Something smells great.'

'For your dining pleasure this evening, Mr Berlin, we have one of your favourites, a delightful steak and kidney pie.'

Rebecca's steak and kidney pie was also Sarah's favourite. No wonder the girl was so happy. But Berlin knew his wife's suet pastry took a little bit of extra effort to get just right, and this was always more of a weekend treat or dinner party dish, not that they gave many of those. He searched his mind for any anniversaries or birthdays he might have forgotten.

'Sounds good, Rebecca, special occasion?'

'Not really, I just felt like something a little different. You can have baked beans on toast if you like.'

'I'll stick with the pie if it's all the same to you. Anything I can do?'

'Can you turf that dog out, please? And make sure the children have finished eating. I made them their own little pies and let them have dinner early.'

Rebecca was bent over the oven, with the door half-open. Ten years, two children, she was wearing an apron and oven gloves, and yet he still felt the desire rise up in him.

She glanced around and saw the look on his face and

smiled. 'Why, Detective Sergeant Berlin, I do believe I could have you arrested for what you're thinking right now. But you know the rule in this house, dinner first and then dessert.'

The word dessert was said with no particular emphasis but the meaning between them was clear. He was still amazed that his desire for her was reciprocated, and strongly too. And more amazed that he could go to her seeking solace sometimes and find passion, and that sometimes she knew before he did that his passion was in reality a search for peace. She knew him better than he knew, or wanted to know, himself and yet she loved him still. If the children were the two miracles in his life then she was the third.

FIVE

The hallway leading from the kitchen to the bedrooms and lounge room was lined with low shelves holding Rebecca's books and hung with simply-framed black-and-white photographs — pictures of the kids. Rebecca was the family photographer and Berlin was always struck by how she'd managed to capture the children's moods and moments, even their personalities as they grew from babies. Sarah's infectious joy and bubbling personality were there for everyone to see, along with Peter's less sunny character. He was a funny boy, dark and morose, and Berlin had once confessed to Rebecca that while he loved his son he wasn't all that sure that he liked him.

She'd smiled and said, 'He's like his dad, Charlie, that's his only problem. We made him at a bad time in your life. You grew out of it and so will he.' Berlin wasn't sure either of those statements was true but he took comfort from them.

In the living room, Pip and Sarah were stretched out together in front of the brightly glowing but relatively ineffectual briquette space heater. Peter was sitting cross-legged in front of the television, eyes locked on the screen. He grunted hello without looking up. Berlin grabbed his daughter by the ankles, hauling her upside down into the air. She shrieked and giggled as he tossed her down onto the couch. Peter turned

round and gave his sister a perplexed look. Like her he was already in pyjamas and dressing-gown ready for bed.

Berlin glanced at the dinner plates on TV trays near the couch, to make sure they had finished their vegetables and pudding. It was a rule in his house that you ate well, you ate often and you ate everything. Berlin had experienced real hunger in the POW camp, and on the long, forced winter march out of Poland, and he hated the idea of wasted food. Most of the neighbourhood dogs existed on scraps from their owners' dinner table, but under that system little Pip would have starved in the Berlin household. Rebecca bought him meat scraps and bones from the local butchers.

'Put Pip outside, please Sarah, and then wash your hands.'

Sarah slid off the couch. 'C'mon Pip, bedtime.' The dog looked up, wagged his tail and then scampered away, starting the usual five-minute evening chase that would leave them both breathless.

'And Peter, you can take the dishes and cutlery out to the kitchen.'

The boy groaned. It was a sound that was becoming more common lately, and right now Berlin wasn't in the mood.

'Do it now and hop to it, Sonny Jim. And for the next week we'll be having a family dinner every night, sitting up at the table together and talking to each other. No more of this eating in front of the TV like savages.'

'I really don't think savages have TV, do they?'

Berlin didn't care for the cold edge of sarcasm in the comment. He felt the old anger flicker across his face, then saw that his son had judged he might have gone too far. Berlin had never belted the lad, but just lately he felt he was being pushed more and more towards it. Before Berlin could respond he felt Rebecca's presence next to him. She put a hand on his shoulder, and the gentle pressure diffused his anger.

'Peter, there's a little boy in this house who might not have a TV if he ever talks back to his father like that again. Now do as you're told and take the dishes out to the kitchen. And then clean your teeth. That TV is going off at seven-thirty sharp tonight. You have school tomorrow and I think you and your sister could both do with an early night.'

Berlin and Rebecca sat down together in the kitchen, the hallway door closed to block the sound of the television. The pie looked spectacular on the table, topped with a dome of golden-brown pastry that crumbled under the knife. Steam billowed out of the broken crust and Berlin could see thick chunks of beef in a sea of rich, dark brown gravy. Peas and boiled carrots were in pots on the stove and Rebecca had made a fresh bowl of mashed potatoes.

The pie tasted as good as it looked, the slow-cooked beef falling apart and the gravy thick and rich with bone marrow. Berlin ate as he always did, silently, head down, glancing up from time to time while methodically working his way through everything on his plate. Rebecca ate too but he sensed she was watching him and he felt there was something on her mind.

He wondered if she wanted a glass of wine with her dinner. There had always been wine with dinner when they'd visited her parents, and she had drunk there but rarely at home and never in front of him. Sometimes Joe next door would hand some of his illegal homemade red across the fence, and if Berlin was home late and she had already eaten, there might be a single glass gone from the bottle. He'd told her often enough that he didn't mind, that it wouldn't worry him, but she always smiled and shook her head.

Berlin wasn't really a wine drinker in any case. He was a whisky man, but his last taste had been the night Rebecca told him she was expecting a baby. It was partially about saving money but mostly about saving himself. After the war his

drinking had been mostly solitary, the quantities impressive. In trying to forget some awful moments in his life, he found himself embroiled in circumstances just as awful, and it was a combination of hitting rock bottom, meeting Rebecca, and the news of a forthcoming child that had led him out of a tangle of alcohol, drugs and despair.

About the author

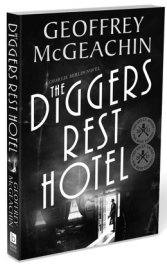
Melbourne born author **Geoffrey McGeachin** has spent much of his life shooting pictures for advertising, travel, theatre and feature films. His work has taken him all over the world including stints living in Los Angeles, New York and Hong Kong.

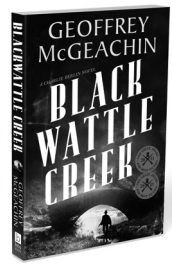
In 2003 he wrote his first novel *FAT FIFTY & F***ED!* (absolutely not an autobiography) which won the Australian Popular Fiction Competition and was published in 2004. This was followed by three tongue-in-cheek spy novels featuring photographer/secret agent Alby Murdoch: *D-E-D Dead*, *Sensitive New Age Spy*, and *Dead & Kicking*.

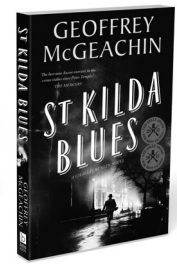
Geoff followed this up in 2010 with the first of the Charlie Berlin series, *Diggers Rest Hotel*, followed by *Blackwattle Creek* and *St Kilda Blues*. The series, set in 1947, 1957 and 1967, earned him two prestigious Ned Kelly Awards for crime fiction.

He now lives on the beautiful Central Coast of NSW and continues to write.

The Charlie Berlin Novels







In 1947 Charlie Berlin has rejoined the police force a different man. Berlin, ex-bomber pilot and former POW is sent to investigate a spate of robberies in rural Victoria, he soon discovers that World War II has changed even the most ordinary of places and people. *The Diggers Rest Hotel* introduces us to post war Australia and Berlin, a 'wonderfully flawed human being – doing his duty, falling apart and picking himself back up again.'

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The third book *St Kilda Blues* dives Berlin into swinging Melbourne of 1967. Berlin has been hauled out of exile in the Fraud Squad to investigate the disappearance of a teenage girl, the daughter of a powerful and politically connected property developer. Investigation leads him through inner-city discothèques, hip photographic studios, the emerging drug culture and into the seedy back streets of St Kilda.

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When a recently widowed friend asks a favour, ex-bomber pilot and former POW Detective Charlie Berlin is dropped into something much bigger than he bargained for. What starts with body parts disappearing from funeral parlours leads to Blackwattle Creek, once an asylum for the criminally insane and now home to even darker evils. If Berlin thought government machinations during World War II were devious, those of the Cold War leave them for dead.

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