GEOFFREY McGEACHIN

'The best new Aussie entrant in the crime stakes since Peter Temple.'

THE MERCURY

ST KILDA BLUES

NED KELLY AWARD 2011 FOR BEST FICTION

NED KELLY AWARD 2013 FOR BEST FICTION

A CHARLIE BERLIN NOVEL

GEOFFREY
McGEACHIN

ST KILDA BLUES

brio
BOOKS

25 SEPTEMBER 1967

Charlie Berlin didn't want to die, not today and definitely not like this, jammed in the passenger seat of a Triumph TR5 sports car hurtling through Monday morning traffic on Kings Way in South Melbourne. Besides not wanting to leave Rebecca without a husband and his kids without a father, Berlin was worried that his life might flash before his eyes and there were some parts he really didn't want to experience again.

He clutched the passenger-side windscreen frame of the Triumph, pressed his feet hard into the firewall and braced himself. When a bloke has survived twenty-nine bombing missions over Nazi-occupied Europe, a POW camp and a twenty-day forced march at gunpoint from Poland into Germany through the worst winter blizzards in a century, getting the life crushed out of you under the steel wheels of a Melbourne tram seemed pretty unfair.

Bob Roberts dropped down a gear and floored the accelerator pedal. As Berlin's head snapped back he caught a glimpse of a white-faced conductor in the open doorway and heard the tram driver frantically ringing the bell. He winced at the screech of metal on metal from the braking wheels, saw a shudder from the back end of the tram and then they were round and past. Roberts was laughing, yelling over the wind

tearing through the open-topped car, the scar on the left side of his face giving his grin an angry, maniacal edge.

'Jesus Christ, Charlie, you don't want to live for bloody ever, do you?'

Berlin shook his head slowly, amazed he was still alive. 'Just till lunchtime would be nice, Bob,' he yelled. 'If you can manage it.'

Roberts veered right a minute or two later, off Kings Way and on to Queens Road, running a traffic light more red than amber and cutting off a tradesman's Holden panel van. The battered blue van had a couple of ladders mounted on top and the startled driver swerved sideways, leaning on the horn. Roberts pulled a leather driving glove off his right hand with his teeth and raised two fingers over his head. Two fingers spread was the victory sign and two fingers together and slightly bent was a very definite 'fuck you'. There was little doubt which one Roberts meant.

Berlin heard the horn again and then the sound of the panel van's engine straining at high revs, trying to catch up with them. The sports car easily outpaced the other vehicle on the straight run down Queens Road, which was lucky for the tradie. If he was after an apology from the Triumph's driver he wouldn't get one, and if he was looking to get beaten to a pulp it was London to a brick on that. Bob Roberts was trouble and he was a copper, making him doubly bad for anyone looking for a fight.

Berlin glanced at the parkland to his right, then back over his shoulder into the cramped space behind the bucket seats of the sports car. The covers of the foolscap manila folders were fluttering in the slipstream so he scooped them up, putting them down in the equally cramped space at his feet. Last thing he fancied right now was chasing missing persons paperwork all over the Albert Park Lake golf course.

'Your mob, eh, Charlie? Wanna stop in for a beer?' Roberts tilted his head to the left, indicating a two-storey building behind a neat hedge. A sign over the hedge read 'Air Force Association' and above it the pale blue RAAF ensign was flying from a white flagstaff.

Berlin shook his head. He'd had plenty of invitations to join and he was sure they did good works and were a nice bunch of blokes but he wasn't the club type. Besides, they had a bar. He'd been a long time breaking the drinking habit and even now he did his best to avoid temptation. In any case, a lot of those ex-Air Force types looked back on the war as the greatest days of their lives, and that wasn't how he saw it. Charlie Berlin didn't want or need to be reminded of things from twenty-some years back. He counted off the years in his head. It really was twenty-two. Jesus.

Think about something else, he told himself. Down at his feet he saw the name on the top of the pile of folders: Gudrun Scheiner. A German name. There were a lot more foreign names turning up around the traps these days; even the Aussie Rules football teams were fielding blokes with names like Jesaulenko, Silvagni and Ruscuklic. Maybe if Essendon had a few more of those post-war refugee kids or kids of refugees on-board they might have finished better than sixth on the league ladder for the year. Water under the bridge now; Richmond were the 1967 VFL premiers and, as young Sarah had said too many times while trying to cheer him up, there was always next year for their team, the not-so-mighty Bombers.

Through the trees on Berlin's right he could see the cold grey glint of Albert Park Lake. There was a restaurant on the lake, across the other side. The Carousel. He had taken Rebecca there to celebrate their tenth wedding anniversary, ten years on from the unexpected pregnancy and his marriage proposal. She'd had 'chicken in a basket', he remembered,

and he'd had a good steak. The St Kilda end of the lake was where Roberts had said they'd found the body of the seventh or eighth girl. That was two weeks back and they would get to her eventually but the most recent missing girl, fifteen-year-old Gudrun, was the priority right now.

He considered picking up the folder and reading about the Scheiner girl, but the wind blowing through the open-topped car made that impossible. And his hands were still shaking from the close call with the tram. He'd know the facts of the case soon enough — too damn soon, from the way Roberts was driving. They were headed towards Brighton, a seaside suburb like its English namesake.

Berlin had gone to England's Brighton by train from the troopship, on his arrival from Canada along with yet another mob of recently graduated Australian aircrew. He guessed that Melbourne's Brighton had never had its mansions and grand houses disfigured with blackout curtains or blast tape crisscrossing the window glass, never had walls of sandbags sheltering its major buildings. The RAAF had its arrivals centre there to welcome and brief the young airmen before they went off to their assigned RAF or RAAF squadrons, off to war and an unknowable fate.

And now Melbourne's Brighton had seen a way-too-young person go off to an unknown fate and Berlin's job was to track her down. In the other, far-off, long-ago Brighton the name Charlie Berlin had once been written on a folder, an RAAF-issue manila folder. In 1944 that folder had been stamped 'Missing, Ops, Germany', though of course he had eventually come home. But Charlie Berlin now knew a secret, and a very bad secret it was. Charlie Berlin knew that when you've been missing and then get found, not all of you ever really comes back.

DORSET, ENGLAND

23 March 1945

Every twitch and jerk of her leg pulled the wire tighter, increasing the torment and bringing her end another minute closer. Tiring now, she was panting from the pain and her long, lonely struggle. She first sensed vibrations through the soil, then heard the sound of the footsteps coming closer, through the clumps of bracken that had once sheltered and protected her. The footsteps were the sound of her death approaching.

The farmer already had two rabbits slung over a shoulder. Tied together by the ears, they were neatly gutted and would be skinned later. Pushing the bracken aside, he made his way towards the burrow and the snare he had set nearby. The boy followed, his tread on the ground softer, lighter. The farmer stopped, studied the rabbit twitching on the wire for a moment and nodded his head.

'She's a fine fat one, eh, lad? 'Nother good'un for the pot, I'd say. We done well.'

The boy didn't reply. The boy hardly ever spoke.

The farmer put his boot on the doe's neck, bent to grasp her hind legs and pulled. There was a sharp snap as

her neck broke. He didn't see the lad's head jerk back as if in sympathy with the rabbit. The farmer bent down and loosened the snare. He took his knife and quickly slit the twitching belly open, flicking the guts, hot, wet and bloody, to one side. Some of the offal splashed onto the boy's face.

The farmer looked up and grinned. 'Sorry, young'un.'

The was no indication from the boy that he had heard, and the farmer let the smile die. The boy was big for his age, and strong with it. He was a strange child too, that was for certain, sent to them from London six months back by the daughter of the farmer's wife's second cousin. They'd said it was from fear of the pilotless and lethal buzz bombs that had begun to fall regularly on the capital after D-Day, though in truth the boy had been sent just to be rid of him.

The child had been made in a dark East End alleyway on a warm summer evening in 1939, three months before war was declared. His mother was not yet sixteen, already with a woman's body and a reputation for being easy. The father was a barrow boy who would rise beyond his humble origins to drive a General Grant tank in the Middle East and be burned alive and screaming inside the vehicle when a German 88 scored a direct hit. At least he had done the right thing, it was agreed by the girl's family, marrying her before being sent off overseas.

He was long gone when the child was born so he never had to see the cold eyes and lack of expression that made the boy's otherwise unremarkable face something of dread. The girl had first ignored her son and had then grown to fear and hate him for his stillness, lack of tears and inability to voice a cry even when hungry. The child was five when the German victory weapons began to fall on London, and that was as good an excuse as any to get rid of him. The girl often wondered why she hadn't

thought to get rid of him when he was in her belly.

Another reason to be rid of the child was that he made things awkward when the girl was entertaining American servicemen in her tiny bedsit. She usually favoured officers but wasn't that particular — if someone was generous to her, she was generous in return. As he grew bigger, the boy became even more difficult to palm off on one of the neighbours. This was not because he was a badly behaved child, in fact he was too well behaved. He simply sat and stared. If she was unable to get rid of him for an evening she made the boy sit and face the wall while the bed squeaked and banged and captains and lieutenants and even once a general laughed and gasped and groaned and quite often called on God, though not for salvation.

There was a roar from behind the farmer and the boy. A black-painted Halifax bomber lumbered into the air above them, its four Bristol Hercules engines screaming. Seconds later a glider attached to the bomber by a long heavy cable lifted into the air behind it, the wind whistling over the plywood fuselage and wings. This must be something big, the farmer realised, given the number of planes he had heard taking off so far. He had listened to the bombers and gliders taking off last June to spearhead the D-Day invasion of Hitler's Europe and, months after that, for the Rhine bridges in Holland. He knew the creaking wooden hulls of the gliders were packed with nervous young members of the elite 6th Airborne Division, glider infantrymen being dragged silently through the sky to an unknown fate.

His own boy might be on board a troop-carrying aircraft right now, bound for the same destination as the gliders. The lad was Airborne too, a paratrooper, proud possessor of a jaunty red beret that marked him as special and earned him free pints at the pub when he was

home on leave. Parachuting into France in the first hours of D-Day he had been blooded in battle, jumping again months later into the disastrous flaming hell that was the Dutch town of Arnhem. He was one of the few survivors to make it back across the freezing, flooding Rhine, guided to the Allied lines and safety by red tracers fired intermittently into the night sky from a Bofors gun. The lad was different after that, more thoughtful, moody, quieter.

When the paratrooper came home on leave after Arnhem the young'un had been sleeping in his bed. They shared the small loft bedroom for a week and the farmer often heard them talking well into the night. This was surprising, since the boy had spoken barely a dozen words since the day he arrived on the train from London.

The soldier's leave had been brief and too soon over. The war in Europe was coming to a close and the farmer hoped his son would be safe and manage to stay alive until the war was over. But even though Hitler was almost finished now, the Japs had shown no readiness to surrender, so soldier men would still be needed for the killing business in India and Burma.

The farmer reset the snare and tied the gutted rabbit by its ears to the pair already on his shoulder. He saw some flecks of gore on the young'un's face and leaned down to brush them off with his rough farmer's hand.

The boy didn't react. Behind the blank face he was thinking, wondering. The hot, wet guts of the rabbit had stung his cheek, which he understood, but there was something else, something confusing. He was wearing rough corduroy trousers, a singlet, a ragged woollen jumper, and on top of that a too-big, hand-me-down tweed jacket the farmer's wife had pulled from a cupboard. He was bundled up against the late winter chill, trousers tied tightly about

his waist with a length of hemp in place of a belt. How, he was wondering, had it happened? Had the guts of the rabbit managed to find their way inside the barrier of his clothing, past the rope and fabric bunched around his waist, dribbling somehow down his body and finally stopping between his legs? That must have been it, he decided, that must have been how it had happened.

He had watched the farmer slip the knife blade down into the still-twitching belly of the rabbit and then upwards, casually flicking the entrails away. The sensation of the warm offal splashing on his cheek had been matched by an instantaneous and unexpected burning between his legs. His little jigger had suddenly felt strange, different, like it was on fire, like it was in flames. But the burning sensation, though odd, wasn't all that uncomfortable. It wasn't uncomfortable at all in fact. There was not much that the boy had ever liked in his young life but now he decided he liked that strange feeling of heat at the base of his belly, right between his spindly legs. He liked it very, very much.

ONE

Charlie Berlin woke early. He hadn't slept well, which was how it seemed to be these days. *Had he ever slept well?* he wondered. Rebecca was beside him and he watched her. She slept well and he envied her that. Her breathing was gentle and regular with an odd, occasional snuffling noise followed sometimes by a slight whimper that always made him smile. The alarm clock said he had another hour but he was awake now and might as well be up.

He moved slowly, trying not to disturb Rebecca. She could be wide-awake instantly, even from the deepest sleep, he had seen it. If one of the children called out from a bedroom a dozen feet away she was there in seconds, to calm and comfort, to make everything better — and then she would be back in bed beside him and fast asleep just as quickly. She could calm and comfort him too but there were some things in Charlie Berlin's life that no one could ever make better.

He did his exercises, push-ups, sit-ups and squats, then shaved and showered. As always, he avoided looking directly into his own eyes in the mirror while shaving, concentrating on the path of the Gillette safety razor gliding though the snowy-white shaving soap. Overall, though, he decided he looked okay, broken nose and all. Despite a slightly thickening waistline and hair tending towards grey he was still pretty fit for a man in his

forties, thanks to the daily exercise regimen retained from his amateur boxing days and his time in the air force. They reckoned a bloke would eventually start to look like his old man but Berlin had very few memories of his own father to go by. In any case his father had never made old bones.

Before he'd found Rebecca, Charlie Berlin was a loner, though not by choice. His parents drowned in a boating mishap when he was six, leaving him and older brother Billy to be raised by their grandparents. Billy Berlin was a wild boy, a larrikin, and Charlie's hero. He enlisted in '39 and disappeared without trace from a Singapore hospital after the city fell to the Japanese. Berlin joined the air force soon after, though as a young policeman he'd been under no obligation to serve. When he arrived home from Europe in 1945 his grandparents were both long dead and his fiancée had left him for a Yank soldier. In some ways he was glad that they weren't there to see what he had become, what the war had made him. It was Rebecca who had saved him, who had brought him back from the dark places.

After putting on a clean white shirt, a neatly knotted tie and his work suit, he wandered out to the front gate to collect the milk and morning papers. As always, his shoes had been carefully polished the night before and he avoided the damp grass bordering the concrete driveway of the three bedroom weatherboard house he had bought with a war service loan. Droplets of dew were beading on the roofs and bonnets of the two cars in the driveway, a small pale blue Datsun station wagon and Rebecca's green and even smaller Mini Cooper.

Back inside the house Berlin put both foil-capped milk bottles in the fridge next to a three-quarters-full bottle from the day before. He filled the kettle and put it on the gas burner. Two slices of yesterday's bread went into the toaster. While he waited he checked the front pages of the both the *Age* and

the *Sun* for any news of far-off battles. For now it seemed the world was quiet, which made him happy.

In local news the judicial inquiry into police corruption under Justice Llewellyn Luscombe was into its third month. The inquiry would decide if there were grounds for a Royal Commission into police corruption. Berlin, like any decent copper, could tell them a Royal Commission was needed and long overdue but also that it would never ever happen. Too many powerful people had too much to hide. He had to squint to read the tiny type of the weather forecast. It said to expect a nice day.

The shower was running and he heard Rebecca humming. She came into the kitchen a few minutes later wearing a long white dressing gown, hair tied back and not a skerrick of make-up. She was still the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

'Keeping student hours now, I see,' he said. 'You'll be out on the streets protesting soon.'

She kissed him on the lips. 'And possibly burning my bra too.' She grinned and leaned in against him. 'But I think you'd probably like that.'

Berlin felt a tingle up his spine. It was partly from the kiss and partly from the whispered comment but, as always, mostly from the smell of her fresh from the shower and the touch of her body against his.

She took butter and a bottle of milk from the fridge and a jar of Vegemite from a cupboard. 'My first job isn't till noon so I thought I'd have a look at the front garden. I think the frosts have finished so we might put in some dahlias and impatiens and marigolds this year. And maybe snapdragons.'

Berlin nodded. He liked snapdragons. The toast was still a way off the shade of brown he liked. The kettle started to whistle and he turned the gas off.

'What have you got on today, Charlie? Anything interesting?'

Berlin poured hot water into the teapot and slipped a knitted tea cosy over it. 'Just a bowling club where some silly bugger's been tickling the till and then fiddling the books. I can barely contain my excitement.' He poured milk into two cups. 'We could probably cut back to one bottle of milk in the morning, since it's only the two of us now.'

They stood in front of the toaster and waited. Rebecca put her head on his shoulder.

'This house is too damn quiet. I miss the little blighters, Charlie.'

Berlin nodded. 'Me too.'

They drank their tea and ate their toast in silence.

Chater's phone call caught Berlin at the front door, just as he was buttoning up his overcoat. The sneering tone always came through in Chater's voice, drunk or sober, though the man was hardly ever sober. *Was it from last night's session or an early start on the grog this sunny Monday morning?* Berlin wondered. Rebecca was of the opinion that putting an incompetent like Chater in charge of the fraud squad was the ultimate irony and demonstrated that there was someone in the Victoria Police hierarchy with a sense of humour.

The conversation was mostly one-sided, the gist being that Berlin was to wait at home and someone would be out to see him directly. Full and total cooperation was expected. Whatever was on his desk would be taken care of by others in the fraud squad. Berlin knew what the sign-off would be and Chater didn't disappoint.

'Don't you bloody fuck this up, Berlin, or I will do you, and do you good and proper, and that's a promise.'

He replaced the receiver and took off his overcoat. What was going on? Chater sounded wary, disconcerted, despite

the usual aggressive and blustering tone that was meant to intimidate but never did. *Was this about the Luscombe Inquiry?* he wondered. Charlie Berlin knew he had his faults but he was an honest cop. And while honesty might be the best policy, as Rebecca told the kids, sometimes it could be the road to ruin, especially in this job.

There wasn't a lot on his desk at the moment so Chater's call meant more time with Rebecca, another cup of tea and a chance to listen to the ABC news together at eight o'clock. She was pleased when he told her and she put the kettle on. They held hands across the kitchen table during the news bulletin, breaking the touch only when the announcer moved on to local news with no word of recent violence in far away places like Israel and Vietnam.

Rebecca changed into khaki Yakka overalls after the news. She had a green thumb when it came to flowers and starting on the front garden would be a good distraction for her. The backyard fruit trees and vegetable patch were Berlin's area. He liked the idea that he could always provide food for his family, no matter what. He made more toast and took it into the front room to wait, wondering who Chater was sending on this mission.

The framed photograph of Peter and Sarah above the living room fireplace was one of Rebecca's best. In the twenty years he and Rebecca had been together, Berlin had developed an understanding of composition and tonality and focus and the difficult skill of capturing a person without artifice. The daughter of a country town photographer, she had been an air force photographer in the war. A post-war career on the social pages of the *Argus* newspaper had of course ended with her pregnancy and marriage to Berlin. After Peter and then Sarah were born she was a mother first, though wedding photography had helped to pay the bills when the kids were finally old

enough to be left in the care of Maria next door.

Peter was just eighteen when the photo was taken, a year back now. In a proper Collins Street studio portrait his hair would have been Brylcreemed, combed and neatly parted and a smile plastered all over his face, but Rebecca's picture had captured the sullen, rebellious little bugger he was and the hurt and confusion and desperation lurking behind his eyes. On Peter's good days those eyes sometimes reminded Berlin of his late grandfather, but sadly the lad's good days had been few and far between.

In the photo, Sarah, then almost seventeen, had her brother in a headlock and her grinning face was alive with mischief and love and happiness. She saw something in her brother that his father couldn't and she protected him even though she was the younger child. She had been Berlin's princess at age seven, a gangling tomboy at ten and at fourteen she had almost magically transformed into a slender, elegant and beautiful young woman with a smile that melted his heart and a wickedly dry sense of humour that usually bemused or confused him. Berlin saw Rebecca in both their faces but Sarah was more like her in temperament and the boy more like him, which was a poor legacy for a father to bestow on a son.

A squeal of tyres came from the direction of the street corner and then the rumble of a big engine. A dark green shape was suddenly reflected in the glass of the framed picture, hiding the children's image in its glare. Berlin turned and looked out through the venetian blinds. A sports car was stopped at the kerb outside his house. The top was down and he could hear music through the living room window. He vaguely knew the words, something about tripping a light fandango. The group was called Procol Harum, he remembered. Most groups had strange names now, strange names and stranger clothes and hair grown shaggy and too long.

Sarah had played that song constantly on the little record player in her bedroom in the weeks before she left. He had banned her from using the radiogram in the living room a year back over a broken needle. It came out later that Peter had been the one who did the damage to the stylus but she had covered for him, taking all the blame. It took her six months to save up for that little record player, working after school at the local doctor's surgery where she was a favourite of all the patients.

The music stopped when the engine was cut. The driver climbed out and paused to light a cigarette before walking towards the house. Rebecca was on her knees at a flowerbed beside the driveway, clearing weeds. The driver stopped beside her and had a word. Just a word. At one time there would have been hugs and kisses but not now. 'He's inside,' he heard Rebecca say without looking up.

Berlin had the front door open before Bob Roberts could knock. If the scars that war had left on Charlie Berlin were all hidden deep inside, the wounds to Bob Roberts from a very different conflict were plain enough to see. There was the limp, of course, not bad but still there, and the thin white scar on the cheek, arcing savagely from his eye socket to the corner of his mouth. And the anger.

The two men shook hands. The last time they'd met, Roberts had been in a suit but now he was wearing a black rollneck skivvy, dark trousers and a brown corduroy jacket. His hair was longer, with sideburns almost down to his jaw. He'd probably soon have a moustache like a Mexican bandit, going by what some of the other St Kilda detectives were starting to look like.

'G'day, Charlie. What is it, six months, a year? You're looking fit. Still doing those morning push-ups, I see. How are things with the fraud boys? I heard you moved over.'

Berlin shrugged. 'About what you'd expect. I suppose I'll get used to it one day.'

'You've got to go along to get along, Charlie, you should know that by now.'

'I'm a changed man, Bob, keeping my head down, my mouth shut and staying well out of sight.'

Roberts grinned. 'Seems to be a lot of that going around just lately. Not worried about the inquiry, are you?'

'Not really, how about you?'

Roberts looked at Berlin and smiled. He was still a good-looking bloke, Berlin decided, despite the scar, or perhaps because of it.

'Me, Charlie? I'm as pure as the driven snow, just like everyone else. Anyway we both know this inquiry will end up same as all the others: wasting six months, costing heaps of money, going nowhere, frightening the chickens and turning up bloody nothing.'

Berlin looked over Roberts' shoulder. Rebecca was watching them, still on her knees with the trowel in her hand. He waved to her and she went back to her weeding.

'Why don't we go through to the kitchen, Bob? There might still be some tea in the pot and you can tell me why you're here, and why I'm here instead of trying to figure out who embezzled six hundred quid from the Oatley Bowling Club.'

'Fair enough, but it's six hundred dollars now, remember, mate? Not quid. And the reason I'm here is there's a young girl, a teenager, gone missing. Disappeared into thin air on Saturday night.'

Berlin searched Roberts' eyes. 'I just read the papers and listened to the ABC news and they didn't mention anything about any missing girl.'

'That's the thing about newspapers and the ABC Charlie, they won't always tell a bloke the stuff he really needs to know.'

TWO

The tea in the pot was cold and Roberts refused the offer of a fresh one. He sat down at the kitchen table and took a packet of Craven A from his pocket. Berlin shook his head at the offered cigarette.

'I've given them up, remember?' He and Rebecca had both stopped smoking five years back when Peter turned fourteen. They'd agreed it was hypocritical of them to forbid Peter to smoke if they still did. It hadn't stopped the little bugger though.

Roberts lit his cigarette with a silver lighter. He put the lighter down on the table. The lighter looked expensive, very expensive.

Berlin searched the kitchen drawers until he found an ashtray. He put it on the table and sat down opposite Roberts. 'So what's so special about this missing girl that Chater pulls me away from the great bowling club robbery?'

Roberts slowly rolled the cigarette back and forth between his thumb and index finger before he answered. 'Couple of things. For one, she's got a rich dad who has the ear of the premier, so Mr Bolte wants action.'

If Henry Bolte wanted action Berlin knew that meant the police commissioner wanted action and that phones had been ringing all over police headquarters at Russell Street, which

explained the tone of Chater's call. And he knew it was time to be careful, to be wary. He counted Bob Roberts as a friend, one of very few he had and he owed him but caution was warranted here.

'You said there were a couple of things.'

Roberts nodded. 'Turns out she's number nine in the last twelve months.'

Berlin felt his stomach tighten. 'Nine? In twelve months? How do eight other teenage girls go missing without anyone making a fuss before now?'

'You know how some kids are these days, Charlie, a lot of sex and drugs and boozing and staying away from home for days at a time. I guess no one saw it as a pattern.' He paused. 'No one but you, as it happens. That's the reason I'm here.'

'I'm not doing missing persons any more. They shifted me sideways in March, after that third girl, remember? No one wanted to hear what I was trying to tell them.'

The police had no dedicated missing persons squad so any missing persons cases were usually flicked to whoever was at a loose end that week. Missing kids, especially the young ones, were the very worst cases, so Berlin always got those. Some were found quickly, some not. Berlin's face told distraught parents he knew something about loss and despair and they warmed to him instantly, telling him stories of the missing tyke that broke his heart. Sometimes there was good news and sometimes no news, not ever. Invariably the cases were one-offs but there was something about these three missing teenage girls that had caught and kept his attention earlier in the year.

Perhaps it was having a teenage daughter himself, or perhaps it was that the missing girls came from Broadmeadows and Fitzroy and Yarraville, all working-class suburbs. He had seen similarities, sensed a pattern in the disappearances, asked

for help, for another officer to assist or even a policewoman, but no one was interested. His suggestion in a memo that it would be a different matter if the missing girls came from more genteel suburbs like Toorak or South Yarra got someone's nose out of joint and there was suddenly a vacancy in the fraud squad that needed filling.

Roberts took a drag on his cigarette. 'Taking you off that case wasn't right, not right at all. You were good, the best, that's what I told them.'

Told who? Berlin wondered. 'Not good enough to be doing it now, though,' he said.

Roberts looked down at the floor. 'You still keep those shoes of yours nicely polished, don't you? Feller could see his face in your shoes, Charlie, if he wanted to look.'

Berlin glanced down. His grandfather had taught him early on that shoes said something about a man and they should be treated with respect. On the forced march at gunpoint through those winter blizzards in Poland, POW Charlie Berlin had also learned that a good pair of shoes, well looked after, could save a man's life.

'I don't see your point, Bob.'

'It's simple. A touch of nugget and a bit of spit and polish is one thing, Charlie, but you've just never bloody learned to stop standing on other people's toes, have you?'

Berlin had lost track of all the ways it was possible to tread on someone's toes in this job. Office politics and the sometimes subtle and ever-shifting power structure within the police force didn't interest him, and that was what always tripped him up. Getting the work done, getting the right result, that was all he was ever interested in — and then getting home to Rebecca and the kids in one piece. He thought about Sarah, so young and so grown up now. And he thought about the parents of the three girls from earlier in the year.

'What do you have on these missing girls so far?'

'Not a whole lot. All young, all good girls, or so their parents told the investigating officers. All went missing from different discotheques and dances in the city or the inner suburbs. That sound familiar?'

It sounded much too familiar to Berlin. 'And you said nine girls?'

'That's what it looks like. They had half a dozen policewomen sorting through missing persons files all of yesterday afternoon, looking for similarities. There were twelve girls on the list originally but three were confirmed as runaways who eventually showed up back at home.'

Berlin felt a sour taste in his mouth, remembering the dismissive response to his request for just one policewoman to help out back in March. 'You're sure this latest one isn't just another runaway?'

'Doesn't seem like it, not the type and her home life looks okay. She was last seen at a discotheque in Little La Trobe Street between nine and ten on Saturday night.'

He did the calculation in his head. Thirty-five hours or so, coming up on a day and a half. 'And there's been no sign of any of the others?'

'Just one, girl named Melinda Marquet, came from out in the bush, out Melton way. They reckon from the timing she was maybe the seventh or eighth to go missing. Pair of uniforms doing a patrol in a divvy van fished her out of the St Kilda end of Albert Park Lake early on a Monday morning.'

'Jesus.' Berlin had to resist the temptation to ask Roberts for one of his cigarettes. 'When was this? I don't remember hearing about it.'

'Couple of weeks back, weekend of the second semi-final.'

That would make it September tenth. Berlin, like most Melbournians, could easily fix dates around Victorian Football

League finals matches. Richmond had cleaned up Carlton and there had been a lot of celebrating that night and the next day. And the Richmond victory was the kind of news that would have pushed a dead girl right off the front pages.

'Did she drown?'

Roberts nodded. 'They found water in her lungs. But the coroner reckons she was probably wishing she was dead for quite a while before it actually happened. It's an ugly one, Charlie, someone having themselves a good time with a very sharp knife. Looks like they kept her tied up someplace, she had nasty rope burns on her wrists and ankles. The investigating detectives kept that part out of the papers, you know, because of the parents. Missing Girl Found Dead in Lake was the headline and the press let it go at that.'

Berlin closed his eyes, picturing the desperate faces of parents begging him for news of their children. He tried to remember the faces of the three girls he had been searching for before he was transferred to the fraud squad. He couldn't picture them and didn't know if he should be glad of it or ashamed.

'Charlie?'

He opened his eyes. 'I'm listening, Bob, go on.'

'I said I've got the files on the missing girls and the Marquet photographs and autopsy report out in the car. I didn't want to bring them in, you know, with Rebecca, and the girl being a young'un like Sarah.'

Berlin saw a flash of a younger Bob Roberts in the comment. 'Thanks, Bob, but Rebecca doesn't need protecting, she's probably tougher than both of us put together. Who's the dad with all the pull, by the way? Got you out of Sunshine's bed so bright and early.'

He regretted the Sunshine comment as soon as he made it. It seemed for a moment that Roberts was going to respond

but then he looked down and crushed out his cigarette butt in the ashtray. He did it very slowly and deliberately though.

'The girl's father is Gerhardt Scheiner, you've probably heard of him.'

'The builder bloke? The German?'

'That's the one.'

The Scheiner name was on building site hoardings, cranes and tip trucks all over town. There was a construction boom on and the Scheiner name was as well known as its owner was reclusive. Whelan the Wrecker might be knocking down Melbourne's grand old brick and stone heritage buildings but it was people like Scheiner who were putting up the new glass and steel towers to replace them. He'd also made a name for himself with very generous philanthropic donations but Berlin couldn't recall ever seeing a photograph of him on either the news or social pages.

'What do we know about him, apart from the fact he has the ear of the premier?' Berlin did understand enough about office politics to know when a situation or case might have the potential to get awkward.

'I did a quick background check on him but there's not a whole lot of personal information available. I've got some mates in the building trade so I rang around. He's a bit of a legend.'

'Meaning?'

'One of those migrant success stories. Seems he walked off a refugee boat at Station Pier in '52 with ten bob in his pocket, was a bricklayer's apprentice a week later, had his own business a year or two after that. Made his first pile of dough doing all those little building jobs for the Olympics in '56 that no one else wanted to touch, and that's about it. But ten years on he's got a farm out in the bush, a nice house by the beach in Brighton and he can call the bloody premier at home at two

o'clock on a Sunday morning and have us all jumping through hoops.'

'If one of your daughters was missing, Bob, you'd do the same thing — pull in any favours you could. So would I.'

'You're not wrong there, Charlie, and right now I'm here looking for a favour. They asked me to help out, just on the Scheiner girl, I mean, and now I'm asking you.'

Stories had been circulating about Roberts lately that made Berlin wary. 'Help out officially?'

Another long pause before Roberts answered. 'Touch of a grey area there Charlie, old son. Officially Tony Selden has the case but we both know what he's like. Nice enough bloke but a bit of a plodder.'

Berlin nodded. It was a fair description of the detective, probably a bit generous truth be told. If the Scheiner girl had time to wait Selden would find her, eventually. But in cases like this time was always what you didn't have. And if this case was in any way connected to the dead girl in the lake . . .

'Unofficially, Charlie, certain people close to the top would like an investigation undertaken with a bit more, let's say, heft to it. They told me to rope in anyone who might be able to help track the girl down quickly and I told them you were the best.'

Berlin wondered who 'they' were. Grey areas and unofficial investigations were tricky even for people with friends at the top and that definitely wasn't him. And right now wasn't the time to be doing anything tricky, but Chater's call this morning hadn't left him any options.

'Gudrun.'

'What?'

Roberts reached into his coat pocket and took out a small photograph. 'The girl's name is Gudrun, she's fifteen. Scheiner's a widower and the girl is an only child.' He put the

black and white photograph on the kitchen table and slid it across in front of Berlin.

Berlin picked up the photograph, not long out of the police photographic darkrooms, he guessed, as it was still slightly damp, probably a copy of a picture given to the investigating detectives by the father. It was a studio portrait and showed a girl wearing a tie and a school blazer with a crest. She was pretty, happy, smiling, innocent. He touched the surface of the picture, touched the girl's face, looked into her eyes.

Berlin handed the photograph back across the table. 'Asking for me must have got right up Chater's nose.'

Roberts slipped the photograph back in his pocket along with his smokes and lighter. 'You could say that, but bugger him. He had no choice and he knows how the game's played.'

Berlin pushed his chair back and stood up. 'I'll just get my coat and hat. I figure that after we look at the files you were planning on taking me to have a chat with Gerhardt Scheiner, right?'

Bob Roberts smiled. 'Well, there you go, Charlie, that pisspot boss of yours is wrong — you actually are a pretty good detective. Now, what do you reckon the odds are we can get out to the car without Rebecca biting my leg off?'

About the Author

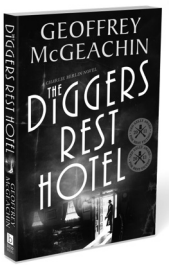
Melbourne born author **Geoffrey McGeachin** has spent much of his life shooting pictures for advertising, travel, theatre and feature films. His work has taken him all over the world including stints living in Los Angeles, New York and Hong Kong.

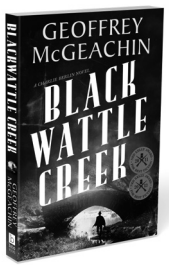
In 2003 he wrote his first novel *FAT FIFTY & F***ED!* (absolutely not an autobiography) which won the Australian Popular Fiction Competition and was published in 2004. This was followed by three tongue-in-cheek spy novels featuring photographer/secret agent Alby Murdoch: *D-E-D Dead*, *Sensitive New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

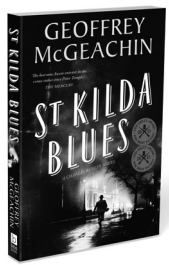
Geoff followed this up in 2010 with the first of the Charlie Berlin series, *Diggers Rest Hotel*, followed by *Blackwattle Creek* and *St Kilda Blues*. The series, set in 1947, 1957 and 1967, earned him two prestigious Ned Kelly Awards for crime fiction.

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.'

Berlin is dropped into something much bigger than he bargained for in *Blackwattle Creek* once an asylum for the criminally insane and now home to even darker evils. Cold War government machinations during World War II are left for dead in the second instalment of the Charlie Berlin series.

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.

ISBN 9781925995961
Published in Australia and New Zealand by
Brio Books, an imprint of Booktopia Group Ltd
Unit E1, 3-29 Birnie Avenue, Lidcombe, NSW 2141, Australia

Printed and bound in Australia
[FSC logo to be inserted here by printer]
★

booktopia.com.au

MELBOURNE'S FIRST SERIAL KILLER IS AT WORK
AND ONLY ONE MAN CAN STOP HIM

It's 1967, the summer of love, and in swinging Melbourne Detective Sergeant Charlie 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. As Berlin's inquiries uncover more missing girls, he gets an uneasy feeling he may be dealing with the city's first serial killer.

Berlin's investigation leads him through inner-city discothèques, hip photographic studios, the emerging drug culture and into the seedy back streets of St Kilda. The investigation also brings up ghosts of Berlin's past, disturbing memories of the casual murder of a young woman he witnessed in the dying days of WWII.

As in war, some victories come at a terrible cost and Berlin will have to face an awful truth and endure an unimaginable loss before his investigation is over.

St Kilda Blues is the third novel in the Charlie Berlin series. Both previous novels, _The Diggers Rest Hotel_ and _Blackwattle Creek_, won the Ned Kelly Award for Best Fiction in 2011 and 2013 respectively.

Scan here to meet the author

RRP $19.99 Crime
9 781925 995961
www.booktopia.com.au