

VICKI STEVENS

## **Paradise Disturbed**

The sun slowly peels back the darkness. Its breath warms the air under the eaves. Birds greet, cows welcome and insects call from dense foliage. I take my first sip of tea and reach for my toast with Vegemite. Other than the sounds of nature, it is deliciously quiet here on the verandah where I can view my corner of the world. Bushy hills, grassy paddocks, clumps of trees dressed in every shade of green, and shrubs blossoming with colourful gifts of Spring all smile back at me. A blue fairy wren with his brown tinted harem hops through the carpet of purple under the sprawling Jacaranda; a Lewin honey eater chortles from the rim of the stone birdbath; while a dragonfly lingers over the ring of petunias and sweet peas growing underneath. I sit back and eagerly replace the cup in my hand with my latest library book.

My concentration is soon interrupted. The scents of gardenia and honeysuckle have become interspersed with drifts of a sweet, yet rancid odour. I raise my head, cock it to the right and breathe in hesitantly. Something rotten, way passed its use-by-date, heralds its presence in fetid waves. I hear a growl in the yard, from around the corner of the house, followed by movement through dried leaves, a dragging. I sit forward, preparing to stand. There comes the scratch of canine nails on timber, and a strange bump, bump, bump as they tackle the stairs.

The smell, as thick as a curtain, precedes the arrival of Monty, a tri-coloured border collie, whose head suddenly peers around the bannister. His eyes, bright with excitement, latch onto mine, and he steps onto the verandah. His feet and nose are dusted with dirt—fresh and moist—like soil found on the edge of the nearby creek, in the shade of Bloodwoods and buttress-rooted figs. I cringe and gasp. In his mouth is a shoe, a man's jogger—blue and grey with a slash of white—a Nike. I assume there is a foot inside for protruding from the jogger is a leg. Not a tanned, athletic, muscle defined leg as would be expected in such a shoe, but a leg torn off below the knee. Bone is visible through shredded flesh dripping with strands of sinew and decaying tissue.

One hand clenches my nostrils, while the other gives a signal to my dog. 'Drop!' I yell, quickly clamping my mouth shut for fear of sucking in putrid air.

Monty obeys my command, and the body part thumps to the floorboards. Maggots roll off and squirm, some falling between the gaps in the flooring.

*What to do? What to do?*

'Where did you find it?' I ask inanely, knowing full well Monty isn't able to interact quite the same as Lassie, or Skippy or even Flipper. Still, I point back down the stairs. 'Show me where you found it?' I plead.

Monty's ears flap like caught butterflies.

'Come!' I say, hurrying with revulsion around the human remains, now being investigated by dozens of buzzing flies. I take the first couple of steps down to the grass. The sun has scarpered, and grey clouds now hover overhead, watching, waiting. A crow caws from a high tree branch, composes a macabre song. Others join in on the chorus.

Monty doesn't follow. He looks from me, to the leg, and back again. His tongue slides out to lick his nose.

'For God's sake, Monty. There is no way in hell I'm going to let you stay here and chew on that. Now, come!'

He drops on all fours and places his head on his paws. His nose twitches along with his wiry eyebrows. He bares his teeth and snarls. I know that look. He is staying put.

I scowl. I can't trust leaving him alone with that ... that thing. He probably has plans to re-bury it somewhere in my garden, along with his other secret stash of bones. I will now have to phone the police and leave it up to them to search the property for the rest of Mr Nike.

I shudder. Horrified. God, who would have buried a body on our property? Shit! Who would have killed him, for a start?

A flash of memory. A vague recollection. My spine is an iron rod; my mouth is a desert. I have seen that shoe before, when it was one of a pair. *But where? And on who?*