

Freshly Dug Up Earth

Brianna gets off the Greyhound bus and immediately feels her chest tighten. With a backpack slung over her shoulder and Google Maps open on her smartphone, she knows as the door to the bus closes behind her, she cannot turn back. She rechecks her phone then looks up in search of a street sign. According to the map, she should see Church Street ahead, leading her to Berry Crescent. As she starts walking, a mental image flashes through her mind of a pale green plastic bag. She can't see what's inside the bag, and as she shakes her head, the image evaporates into wisps of clouds. Though the smell of freshly dug up earth lingers. She looks around now, but there isn't anyone on the street at this time of night. Thank God for that! The last thing she wants is for someone to see her acting weird and call the men in white coats. And so, with her phone in hand and a backpack slung over her shoulder, she makes her way towards Church Street.

“Brianna!” he pulls her into his arms, squeezing her so tight, she struggles to push him away.

“I can't breathe, Brian!”

“Sorry,” he chuckles, releasing her and moving into the tiny hallway. “Come on in. How was the trip?”

“Boring,” she replies in a tone that suggests she doesn't want to talk about the seventeen-hour ride from Sydney.

Brian nods in understanding and uses his hand to gesture for her to please come into his humble home. Brianna steps inside with a look of apprehension. “Welcome to my flat.” He says in his most welcoming voice. Gosh! She had forgotten how jovial her twin brother could be. She also doesn't bother correcting his use of ‘flat’ instead of ‘apartment’ – since his home is on the ninth floor of a newly-developed high-rise in the heart of Brisbane. “You hungry?”

“Starving,” she says, taking off her backpack and letting it fall to the carpeted floor.

“Just hang your jacket there, and I’ll warm you up some pasta.” He disappears down the short hallway and through a door to his right.

She does as she’s told and hangs her leather jacket on the hook next to his woolen cardigan. And as she makes her way down the hall, she looks at the photos on the wall, all in shiny black frames. She stops at one and looks at the two little kids in matching elf pajamas, sitting crossed legged in front of a Christmas tree, looking up into the camera. A small smile starts to form on her lips, and suddenly that smell of freshly dug up earth engulfs her senses again. She closes her eyes and leans back against the opposite wall inhaling slowly.

“You want some wine?” Her brother yells from the kitchen, bringing her out of her daze and back to the present. This feels wrong. She shouldn’t be here. “Bri?” he is standing at the kitchen entrance; a questioning look on his face. “Toilet is through there is you want to wash up.” He points a finger to a door next to where she is standing.

She gives him her most reassuring smile and nods, “No wine for me, thanks. I’ll be right there.” She hastily makes her way through the door to her right. It’s a bedroom. His bedroom. And it’s a mess – the bed is still unmade, and there are a few open beer bottles on the nightstand and more on the floor. She had not expected anything less of course. He had always been the messy one growing up. But didn’t he always drink Coopers? These are all Heineken bottles. Her eyes scan the room, and she sees another door on the wall to the right. She makes her to it, touches the doorknob and once again, a vision of a pale green plastic bag floods her mind. Only this time it’s clearer. She still can’t see what is inside – does she want to see, though? She turns the doorknob and makes her way into the tiny bathroom. There is just enough room for her to squeeze herself against the vanity so she can close the door. To her left is the smallest shower she had ever seen – how does her six-foot-tall brother shower in there? To the right is the toilet, and thankfully, it’s clean.

She looks at herself in the mirror – her pixie-cut blond hair is a little disheveled, and her blue eyes look tired. But what should she expect after spending nearly a day on a bus? The water from the tap is warm on her cold skin, and she uses the bar of soap to wash her hands to her elbows. Sandalwood? Brian had always had sensitive skin and could not use anything but unscented soap. Strange.

After splashing water on her face, she grabs the towel from its hook to dry off. Her reflection looks better, but she needs sleep. If only it were as easy as that, though. She has a feeling; she won't be getting any sleep here. Something just doesn't feel right.

“And then he said we should just do it. And we did. And it blew up. I couldn't believe it. We did this huge marketing campaign, and within two months, we had investors, and we were growing. It's amazing, Bri.” Brianna gives him a nod and a smile before putting another forkful of alfredo into her mouth. She is watching him closely, looking for any sign to validate her feeling of trepidation. Picking up her glass of orange juice, she pretends to listen as Brian continues speaking. But something is different. She had always been able to read her brother. Not just because they are twins, but she has always been able to feel things when she's around him. It has been a gift and a curse ever since she was in third grade. When Michael Brown said he wanted to show her something behind the giant slide on the school playground. He had taken her hand, and at once, she had seen exactly what he had planned to do, in her mind. She had then pulled back her hand, slapped him across the face and told him she didn't want to see his penis and that he was a disgusting boy before running off to find her brother. And even back then, there had been a faint smell of freshly dug up earth.

“So, if the company is doing so well, why are you still in this poor excuse for an apartment?” She asks, arching her brow.

And without missing a beat, he replies, “Still got six months left on the lease.” He looks at her over the top of his wine glass – his second since they had sat down for dinner.

She continues to eat and tries to avoid his gaze. He had just outright lied to her and thought she would not notice. Ever since she had sat down, a feeling of unease had been creeping over her skin. And as delicious as this pasta is, the scent of dirt accosted her nose the entire time. She also noticed Brian had been filling the silence with updates of his life since they had last seen each other. It is as though he needs to keep talking so that things don't get too quiet – which usually gives her mind time to see things unspoken.

But Brianna is older and wiser. And even though the pale green plastic bag had caught her off guard earlier, she had already sensed more going on here than Brian is letting on. And it's time she opens that can of worms.

“Brian,” she says, interrupting his verbal diarrhea. He looks up at her with a look that suggests he had forgotten she was in the room. “Why am I here?”

There is the quickest shadow that flickers in his blue eyes before he blinks, “I missed you.” He gets up, clearing their plates. They are sitting at a square table in the small kitchen, and he simply turns around, puts the dishes into the sink before turning back to her. “Lift,” he says, his eyes on her glass of juice as he picks up his empty glass. His hand goes under the table, there is an audible click before he lifts the table at the front end and pushes it against the wall where he secures it with another click. Brianna, still seated, looks up at him in bewilderment. Her brother stares down at her, picks up the nearly empty bottle of Chardonnay from the counter and says, “Come.”

She follows her brother from the kitchen, and across the hallway into the largest room in the apartment. The living room has a sleeper couch, a small end table, and a large flatscreen mounted to the wall opposite the couch. This room is surprisingly clean. Brian settles himself on the couch, and Brianna lingers in the entranceway.

“I won't bite, Bri,” he chuckles, meeting her gaze.

This time she doesn't smell earth, nor does she see anything in her head. Her brow furrows as she tries to read him. She sits on the other end of the couch and sips her juice. Her back is rigid, and she can't relax. "Brian, I spent the last seventeen hours in a foul-smelling bus." She looks over at him.

"I offered to pay for a flight," he answers defensively.

"You know I can't fly." And just then, an image of a woman sneaks into her head. "Who is she?" Her brother takes in a sharp breath and watches as she puts her glass on the end table. Her fists clench on her lap as the image of the woman becomes clearer: she is standing in the very kitchen they had just left. Her dirty blond hair hung in waves around her shoulders. She is wearing a button-down floral dress and no shoes. Standing at the two-burner stove, steam rising from whatever she is cooking. And just as the woman turns to face her, Brianna sees the flatscreen on the opposite wall, and she blinks furiously. Her head snaps to the right, "Whose apartment is this, Brian? Who lives here?"

When Brianna had come running to him in the cafeteria in their third grade and told her what Michael Brown had wanted to show her in the playground, Brian had laughed out loud. He then told her that boys didn't do things like that. Especially not with girls. She had insisted, and he wanted to know how she could have known what Michael would do before they had made it to the slide. She had gone pale then and mumbled that she just knew. Brian had then bought her a vanilla sago pudding and told her it would be alright. They had sat on the field and finished their lunch before the bell rang for their next period. It wasn't until that evening when he asked her about it again and she confessed that she had seen it in her head when Michael had touched her hand. Brian had seen enough movies to know that they were to keep this to themselves. Any mention of her ability to an adult would result in men in white coats taking his sister away to be tested on. And so, for the next eighteen years, Brian

had kept her secret. Until one day, three years ago when Brianna's visions went too far. And it had driven him away. So far away, he had moved to Brisbane. Or so she had thought.

In fact, Brian had taken to heart everything she had told him about what she had seen. And he went digging. His leads led him to this apartment. And to the story, he was about to reveal to her.

"It's her apartment." He says, choosing his words carefully. "Mum." Brianna looks up at him, her eyes wide. "She's gone. I should say it 'was' her apartment. She left yesterday after telling me everything. I told her you were on your way, and she decided she couldn't stay."

Brianna watches as he turns away from her and reaches his hand over the arm of the couch. When he brings his hand back, she gasps and gets up quickly. It's a pale green plastic bag. Suddenly the smell of freshly dug up earth permeates the air around her, and she puts a hand over her mouth.

"Brianna, please sit. Let me explain." He says, reaching out his other hand towards her. She looks at his hand through tears but doesn't take it as she sits back down, her shoulders tense. "She was protecting you. Is, still protecting you."

"You and Bri were about six years old. Bri had brought lice home from school and I had stripped the farmhouse down. Washed all linen and plush animals. Even the curtains had to be washed. I remember, I spent hours that day just washing. I was outside, hanging the last of the bedsheets on the line. It was a beautiful summer's day. Not a cloud in the sky. You were playing in your treehouse. Bri was drawing on the terrace. I was exhausted, and the sun was beating down pretty hard, I decided to take a break in the hammock with a book. I hadn't been sleeping well. Which is normal for someone who had just had a baby."

Brian stops chewing his sandwich and slowly looks up at his mother.

“Yes, Brian. I had just had a baby. And she was three weeks old on that beautiful summer’s day.” She says and he puts his sandwich back on the plate. She can see his mind reeling as his pupils dilate and his breathing change. “It was also on that day that she died.” Now he slumps back in the chair, his head brushing the kitchen towel hanging on a hook on the wall. He opens his lips to speak, but she puts up her hand and says, “You promised you’d listen.” Brushing his beard with his hand, he nods encouragingly at her. “I dozed off, and by the time I woke up, the sun was hanging low. I just remember Brianna waking me and asking if she could please have a popsicle. She was filthy; there was dirt under her fingernails, and her knees with dirt too. I asked her what she had been doing and why she had dirt all over her, and she said she had been playing in her house.” His brow furrowed, she explains, “She didn’t like climbing up the ladder to your treehouse. So, your dad had built her a little wooden playhouse in the back garden, near the boundary fence.”

Brian watches as she picks up the bottle of Heineken and takes a large gulp, allowing the drink to slither down her throat before continuing. “I never said this to anyone except your dad, but Brianna didn’t take kindly to a new baby in the house. The day we, your dad and I brought little Ingrid home from the hospital, Brianna just sat in the corner of the living room the whole time. We thought it was her way of adjusting. But dad had seen the way she looked at the baby. Every time Ingrid was brought into a room, Brianna would slip out. But she wouldn’t just leave. No, she would skulk just at the entrance and watch. Once, I caught her standing in the doorway as I struggled to get Ingrid to latch to my breast. Ingrid had been fussy all morning and nothing would soothe her. Brianna had this smile on her face – almost gleeful, sinister even. Ingrid had not nursed for nearly six hours that day, and my breasts were full. The look Brianna gave me scared me. When I told your dad, he tried to placate me by saying my hormones were out of sync and I shouldn’t worry too much. Well, he was wrong.” She pulls a tissue from her apron pocket and wipes her eyes. When she looks back up at Brian, he can see the pain. “I need you to know that I had to leave. I was protecting Brianna.

But I also couldn't stand to be around her. I lost the love of my life the day I left your father. And he took to his grave the real reason why he became a single father of twins, knowing that one of them had been responsible for the death of his child as well as the breakdown of his marriage. The day your sister woke me and asked for a popsicle was the day she had killed your little sister and buried her in a plastic bag inside her little playhouse. Three days later, you dad put in the flooring."

"The bag," Brianna whispers now, her eyes darting between her brother and the bag on his lap. "Brian, what is in the bag?" She gets up and puts as much distance between them – which isn't much because the room is so tiny. But her brother doesn't make a move to open the bag, and she yells now, "What's in the bag?"

He slowly opens the bag and pulls out a soiled baby blanket. It had once been white with pink satin trim. Now it held a large muddy stain. Brianna steps back, hitting the wall and slumping down to the carpet. She doesn't see him make his way to her as a vision of small hands patting a mound of freshly dug earth flashes in her head before everything goes black

The End