

## A Rose From the Weeds

It began as it would end: with Lia Samuel.

Lia had always known she was her parents' favorite child. When compared to her older brother of seven years, Julien, Lia received more attention and affection from her parents. Her mother would run her thin fingers through little Lia's long brown hair and say how happy her daughter made her, how proud she was of her youngest child. Lia's father would give her rides on his shoulders, jogging through the inside of their one story house and causing Lia's body to bump up and down with the motion. She would laugh with the bumps, so her father would over-emphasize each footfall, bumping her even more. Julien had a bad temper, and was often cruel to Lia—he would call her names, push her around, or yell at her whenever he felt like it. Lia knew he didn't like how much attention she received from their parents, but there was nothing she could do about it, so she tried to stay out of his way as much as possible.

Lia lost her father at the age of eight due to a car crash. The doctors at the hospital filled in Lia's mother first, then left her to figure out how to break the news to the children. Angie Samuel sat Lia and Julien down in the waiting room of the hospital and tried her best to tell them how their father died. She said he was drunk behind the wheel, driving home from a bar twenty minutes out from their house. He lost control of the car and hit a deer—Lia's father had once said that deer hardly ever come close to downtown Portland, but one must have—then spun out, crashing into a telephone pole at fifty miles an hour. She said he was killed on impact.

Lia was devastated, but she managed to hide it. Her mother and Julien both had different methods of coping, however. Angie would lock herself in her room away from her children for hours on end, while Julien took out his anger at the world on his younger sister. Before their father died, Julien had expressed a lesser cruelty to Lia; based on what some of her friends told her about their brothers, she gathered it was normal for brothers to be cruel on some level.

After their father, however, Julien grew more and more violent by the day. Influenced by their mother's poorly hidden stash of alcohol, the once-verbal fights progressed to physical, and more often than not, Lia would end her days with bruises, cuts, and tears. Her hatred for her brother bloomed in those weeks, and some days she found herself fantasizing of hurting him just as he hurt her. These thoughts terrified her—she didn't want to be anything like Julien—so she shut them down hard as soon as they came.

Whispers had followed Lia for most of her life. They were often indecipherable, and for many years, Lia thought she was going crazy. After her father died, however, she found she could understand the voices. They were the voices of her family, her friends, her teachers at school, strangers on the street. She figured out soon after that those voices were their thoughts. Being an avid reader and lover of all things fantasy, eight-year-old Lia was over the moon. That is, until she heard her brother's thoughts for the first time. The darkness of Julien's mind seeped slowly into her, tainting her and temporarily removing any happiness she felt. She quickly learned how to block his thoughts from her mind

Two months after her father passed, Julien came into Lia's bedroom. He smelled strongly of alcohol, and Lia knew without a doubt that if her brother wasn't stopped, he would kill her. His thoughts penetrated the barrier she had put up, and she could feel the darkness in him, his drunken intent clear as day. He wasn't going to let her leave the room alive. A glint of silver caught her eye, drawing her gaze to the knife in Julien's hand.

Without warning, he lunged at her with the knife, a crazed expression on his face.

She ran.

Their mother was out of the house, so she would be no help, and Lia couldn't stay ahead of Julien for long. Eventually he cornered her, and Lia, so scared she thought her heart would give out, slumped down to the ground and dove into herself. In doing so, she felt something unlock in her, like new knowledge was bestowed upon her by the heavens. She felt what she could only describe as "mind fingers" reach out from within her and slip into Julien's consciousness. A question awaited her there. Nothing as simple as words; just the presence of uncertainty, as if a question mark could be transcribed into a feeling. The emoticon hung in the darkness of her brother's mind, and Lia couldn't help but pour her desire for life into that emptiness. With her desire for life came the darker desire of her pain reflected back at her brother, and so once the mind fingers retracted, leaving Lia gasping for air, Julien turned the knife so the point touched his shirt, resting below his sternum, angled slightly upward. A blank look in his eye, face pale yet hands steady, like some part of him knew what was about to happen but he was powerless to stop it. From her corner, Lia only watched.

The red that bloomed on her brother's shirt, a rose reaching out from the weeds into her waiting hands, was the most beautiful color Lia would ever see.

Sirens came after that. Sirens and tears from her mother and a half-assed funeral for a boy people only liked in theory. Eulogies from his classmates and girlfriend that felt like the hardened sugar on top of some nasty pudding they served in fancy restaurants: blasted with flame to purify, hardened to hide what lies underneath. Lia knew what they were thinking while they spoke. She knew what they really thought of her brother. She didn't blame them for not meaning the words they said. Prior to the funeral, Angie had asked Lia if she wanted to say something, but Lia had stayed silent. She had no words, no tears, no grief for the brother she killed.

Lia was never found out. She played the part of a grieving little sister well, both for her mother's sake and that of her own. Playing that part kept her safe and out of the questioning gazes of the police. The last thing Lia wanted to do was go to prison for murder, now that she was finally free of her abusive brother. Even if there was any suspicion on her, who would believe that a little girl convinced her older brother of seven years to end his life? By going into his mind with her psychic powers, too? Lia would sooner be tossed into a psychiatric hospital or locked up by the government to be studied than arrested for murder.

As Lia grew, she learned to control her abilities. Instead of hearing a barrage of voices from all around her, she mastered the skill of listening to one person's thoughts at a time. She also learned her mind fingers stemmed from her emotional state. When she was over-stressed, or fearful for her life, or under any kind of emotional duress, that was when the other side to her powers presented itself. After some trial and error, Lia mastered that ability, too. She found out that she could draw from other people's thoughts, use their negative emotions to influence her own, and induce the emotional state she needed.

In the beginning, it was a slippery slope to navigate. Lia had to have the right amount of strength on both her own emotions and the emotions of whoever she was drawing from. There were times when she drew too much of another person's negativity, leaving them husks of their former selves. She hoped she hadn't left those people feeling emotionless forever, while the stolen emotions roiled inside of her. On the particularly bad days, she began to understand why her older brother had turned to alcohol and abuse to cope with his grief.

By the age of thirteen, she had it under control. Never in her wildest dreams would she have imagined how *good* using that power made her feel. Her heart would race, every nerve in her body alight with a fire that burned hot and bright, stronger each time she used her power.

Although she had initially promised herself she would only use it when absolutely necessary—like in another life or death situation—the definition of “absolutely necessary” became fainter and fainter as time went on. She would use that ability to get herself an invite to the hangouts and parties of the popular kids in her class, to land herself the position of Captain on her school’s soccer team, to get good grades on her tests. Never overdoing it, always pushing just enough to get her what she wanted.

Eventually Lia began to test the limit of what she could do with her persuasion power. If she and her friends fought, she would convince them she was right. If her mother wasn’t being present and cooperative, Lia would make her better. She even used it to get a date with the pretty girl from her homeroom a couple of weeks after her fourteenth birthday. The best part was, no one ever knew they had been influenced by Lia. They were all securely under the impression that their actions or decisions were their own, disregarding Lia’s nudges as soon as they happened. Things worked out well for Lia, and there were never any negative consequences. That is, until the days leading up to her 15th birthday.

It began as it would end: with a whispered thought.

The first time it happened, Lia was sitting in class. Ordinarily she would block out her classmates’ thoughts, but somehow one managed to sneak by her barrier.

*ugly desperate bitch.*

Taken aback, Lia looked up from her work, trying to identify from whom that thought had come from. She hadn’t recognized the voice, which was odd because she could recognize the inner voices of almost anyone she came across. That thought had felt very pointed, like it was thrown right in her face. Like someone intended for her to hear it. Shaking her head minutely, Lia went back to work. She would turn fifteen in six days.

The second time it happened, Lia was walking home from the bus. An elderly woman passed her, and she was hit with another thought.

*killing your brother wasn’t enough for you to prove you’re the golden child.*

Lia whirled around and demanded the old lady say it to her face. The woman looked confused and a little terrified, and asked what Lia meant. The woman’s voice didn’t match the

voice she heard, just as none of her classmates' did. Lia backed off immediately, muttering an apology, then turned away and kept walking. She would turn fifteen in five days.

The occurrences picked up from once a day to two, sometimes three times a day, then to every other hour. Three days after the first occurrence, Lia was hearing similar biting thoughts almost hourly. Always from an unknown voice, always growing nastier and crueller each time. The voices would poke at her appearance: at the shadows under her eyes from sleepless nights when she wasn't able to block the comments; at her accomplishments; at her personality, even. On the fourth day, the mass of voices brought up her family.

*your father got himself drunk because he couldn't stand you anymore  
your mother knows what you did and hates you for it, that's why she shuts herself away  
you made your brother kill himself and joyfully watched as he died, what kind of sister  
does that?*

The voices didn't have a pattern or consistency to them. They would come when she was alone, with people, awake or asleep. Lia began seeing flashes of movement out of the corner of her eye, but when she turned around, heart beating fast, there was nothing there. Very quickly, the flashes turned to shadows on her wall, or a breath on the back of her neck. Sometimes she could just barely make out the shape of a person, but the second she tried to focus on it, it vanished. She would turn fifteen in two days.

On the night before her birthday, Lia awoke at three in the morning to someone standing over her bed. Once her eyes adjusted to the dark, she stifled a scream. It was her brother Julien, wearing the same thing he had the day he died, his shirt dark with blood. He opened his mouth to speak, and Lia, unable to move, realized with horror that the voices she had been hearing for days belonged to him.

"Look at you," he said, disgusted. His dead eyes traveled lazily over her figure. "You look terrible. Can't handle the truth thrown at you, huh? You felt the need to kill me, but you're worse than I ever was. Perfect Lia, how would everyone react if they knew all the crap you've pulled? You think you're all high and mighty, holier than thou, when really you're manipulation personified."

Julien looked down, and Lia saw he held a knife. The same one he had used all those years ago. Though it was clean now, Lia thought she could smell blood emanating from the steel

blade. Julien met her eyes once again, and the moment he did, Lia felt dark tendrils enter her mind, poking around, draining her of all warmth.

“Not so pleasant, is it?” Julien said, turning the knife slowly in his fingers. Lia was unable to speak, rooted to the spot by her own power being used against her. Then, she felt the urge to **Stand**. She got up out of bed against her own volition. Julien offered her the knife, and she watched in growing desperation as her hand wrapped around the hilt.

“You know what to do,” Julien said, a glint in his eye. And he was right—she did know what to do. Lia couldn’t protest, couldn’t scream or call for help. Her mind fingers held her steadily, trapped within herself. All she could do was plead with her eyes, trying to convey her terror to the ghost standing in front of her. She felt the point of the knife press against her chest, right above her sternum, angled slightly upward. A rose bloomed on her shirt, petals stretching in every direction, so similar to the tendrils holding Lia steady. Her brother smiled a thorny smile.