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# ROSE IN CHAINS

JULIE SOTO



MAGPIE

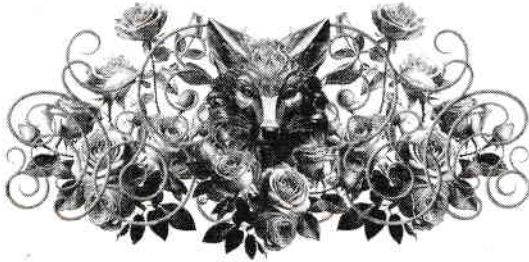
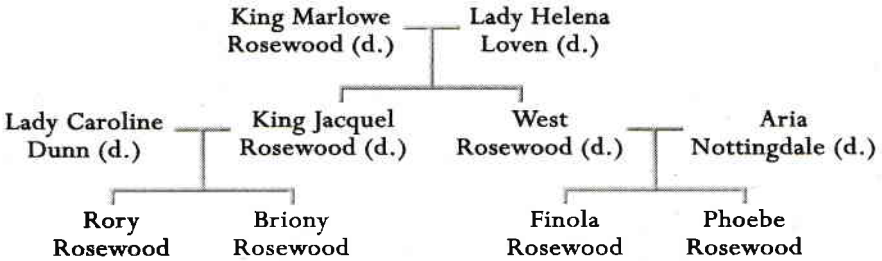


## CONTENT WARNING

This work contains explicit sexual content, scenes with gore and violence, and sexual assault of a POV character. Non-consensual sex is referred to, and the buying and selling of human beings into captivity is a core theme of *Rose in Chains*. Forced sterilization, death of minor characters, and torture are present in this story. For a more detailed list of content warnings, please visit [www.juliesotowrites.com](http://www.juliesotowrites.com)



# EVERMORE ROSEWOOD FAMILY TREE



## BOMARD

THE SEAT OF BOMARD – VERONIKA MALLOW  
LINE TO THE SEAT

1<sup>st</sup> – Riann Cohle  
 2<sup>nd</sup> – Aron Carvin  
 3<sup>rd</sup> – Genevieve Trow  
 4<sup>th</sup> – Hap Gains  
 5<sup>th</sup> – Moira Locklin  
 6<sup>th</sup> – Caspar Quill  
 7<sup>th</sup> – Alba Twindle  
 8<sup>th</sup> – Orion Hearst  
 9<sup>th</sup> – Florence Kleve  
 10<sup>th</sup> – Cal Gidrey

succeeded by Del Burkin  
 succeeded by Lucille Piken  
 succeeded by Canning Trow  
 succeeded by Stance Green  
 succeeded by Rowan Locklin  
 succeeded by Liam Quill  
 succeeded by Collin Twindle  
 succeeded by Toven Hearst  
 succeeded by Ryden Kleve  
 succeeded by Evelyn Gidrey

# PART ONE

*Some of us would argue that the source of our magic comes from blood—from the heart—but I think that too simple an explanation. Do we not summon it? With our minds? With our intentions?*

*I shall be hanged for saying it, I know, but I believe harnessing power from our minds is how we elevate our magic beyond our ancestors. Saying we are harnessing our hearts is too simple.*

*For those among us who have loved have done so with our hearts, yes—but through a willing fault of mind as well.*

—THE FIRST WRITINGS OF VINDECCI, CIRCA YEAR 1507  
AFTER RECORD, ALSO KNOWN AS YEAR 8 BV  
(BEFORE VINDECCI)



## CHAPTER 1

**B**RIONY THOUGHT IT WAS STRANGE that she didn't feel it when her brother died. The crack of the boundary evaporating rattled her ribs, and the rock scraped under her fingertips as she gripped the ledge looking out over what was left of the country of Evermore—but she felt nothing in her soul when Rory died.

As his twin, she'd tugged on the thread that ran between them many times—when he was injured, when he needed help. Briony reached for that thread now, seeking out the vein of magic in her chest that was reserved for Rory only. Dark silence was the only response. She supposed she'd had no premonition, either, when her father had fallen four years ago, and her mother had been dead already when they'd cut Briony out of her.

But when the dust billowed up like a cloud on a summer's afternoon just under half a mile away, and the calm that had curled around her and Cordelia collapsed into rumbling chaos, Briony knew that Rory was dead.

His protection boundary around the castle had fallen. He was dead.

And yet her soul didn't wrench in half.

Briony watched the moon move away from the sun, the eclipse ending as soon as it had begun.

*How strange,* she thought numbly.

"No..." Cordelia whispered.

Briony looked to her right and found her friend's pale fingertips almost translucent against her lips. The wind whipped Cordelia's auburn hair around her eyes, as if trying to spare her from the sight. On the other side

of Cordelia, Anna stepped forward to the balcony ledge as if in a trance, her mouth open. The sunlight reflected off the purple rose crest on her armor.

Briony looked back to the cloud of dust and ash that blossomed higher and higher to cover the moon and the sun in their dance. She saw the reflection of it to her left in the water of the lake.

The last dragon flapped her spindly wings and soared away from the mess of humans on the battlefield, returning north.

“Stay here,” Anna said, running quickly toward the balcony stairs. She pivoted, changing her mind. “No . . . You should go inside. Get somewhere safe and wait.”

Briony stared at her. Cordelia choked on a sob.

Anna gazed back, and Briony watched her guard’s mind twirl through her plans and strategies. Anna was supposed to stay by her side; she had held her as a baby and promised her father to give her life for Briony’s.

Before she could overthink, Anna darted down the stairs.

Briony turned back to the dust cloud, wondering if parts of her brother were inside of it. Her brother who was supposed to be the one to end this war. Her brother who had been foretold.

She gasped then, as if the idea of the failed prophecy was the slap she’d needed.

Rory was gone. Tears filled her eyes on a shuddering inhale, and she imagined what the front would be like. A thousand soldiers realizing that their long-held hope, their Heir Twice Over, was just a man after all.

She shrugged off her cape. It wouldn’t help her run. Neither would her slippers or draped silk gown, but she didn’t have time to change.

She had one foot on the stairs when Cordelia grabbed her wrist, tugging her back. “Where are you going?” The panic pinched her voice. “We have to hide!”

Briony laid her hand on her friend’s wrist. “If we hide, we’ll be the last ones left,” she said, her voice flat.

Cordelia’s blue eyes widened. The moment Cordelia’s grip relaxed, Briony spun and raced down the stairs, her friend’s light footsteps chasing behind her.



## CHAPTER 2

### *Six Hours Earlier*

**B**RIONY SAT AT THE DESK IN HER BEDROOM, gaze focused on the steam curling from her teacup like dancing flames. With a distracted twitch of her fingers, she imagined her favorite willow at the edge of the lake and watched as the steam did her bidding, rising up to form a trunk and falling down into hundreds of reedy branches kissing the water.

Sometimes it was easier to manipulate something unimportant when she couldn't find the spell she needed to make the world right. Steam from her cup could make a pretty picture, even if the picture outside the castle walls wasn't as pretty.

She grasped the humming thread of magic between her eyes. The translucent mist of the hot tea billowed out to show the lake next to it, and her mind supplied the silhouette of a boy with a lithe body sitting at the base of the tree. She had just conjured the book in his hands when her bedroom door opened. Briony startled, and the willow disappeared, steam curling like normal again.

She swung around, feeling caught in the act of something, and Rory was there in her doorway.

"Is it time already?" she asked, checking the clock.

"No, I'm just . . . visiting."

Briony pulled a face. "Don't do that."

"Do what?"

“Don’t say goodbye.”

“All right, I won’t.”

“Good.”

His lips twitched. As twins, they shared the same curved mouth, the same brown eyes, the same chestnut hair color. His nose was broader like Father’s, and her hair was wavy like their mother’s, but the differences in their appearances were subtle.

Rory hooked his thumbs into the tailored trousers he’d had made for battle. “But I should warn you that Didion wants to say goodbye. Wants to probably say more than goodbye—”

Briony groaned and tilted her face back to the high ceiling. “This is your fault,” she said. “If you hadn’t proposed to Cordelia, then Didion never would have gotten these ideas.”

Rory plopped onto her bed. “Actually, I’d say he got the idea when you started taking walks after midnight with him—”

She gasped. “Who told you about that? That was a year ago, and walking was all we did!”

Rory leveled his gaze at her. “Couldn’t find a better time of day to walk?”

Briony bit her lip. “All right, maybe we did a bit more—”

Rory covered his ears. “Stop.”

“But I swear my virtue is intact.”

He rolled on his back and squeezed his eyes closed. “Stop talking, I beg you.”

Laughing, Briony dropped onto the other side of the bed. “Is there anyone *else* who wishes to say goodbye? Any other suitors I should know about?” She fluffed her flowing summer skirts around her legs.

Rory smiled, but then the curve of his mouth dripped like wax. “I don’t know. Are there?” he asked quietly.

Her breath caught in her chest. “What do you mean?”

His eyes flickered between her own, seeking. “If it’s not Didion, then who does have your attention?”

“No one.” Her voice was high and rushed. “It’s—it’s *war*, Rory, in case you hadn’t noticed. Why would anyone have time for any of that?”

“Well, some of us find the time quite easily. Anyway, after today, things may be different.” He sat up, and she watched his fingers as they played with the long leather cord he usually tucked under his shirts; the silver pendant at the end of it had belonged to their mother.

Rory was always so humble when the possibility of victory was brought up. As if he wasn’t the one prophesied to be the victor. As if he didn’t quite believe it himself.

“Yes. Today may change everything.” She reached across the bed and grabbed his hand. “Do you want to go over it again?”

He looked up at her and nodded. It would always be like this with them, she realized.

On the first day of school, when Father had asked her to look out for Rory, she hadn’t understood why she needed to take care of her sixteen-year-old twin brother. Shouldn’t he be the one looking out for her?

“He may struggle in lessons you excel at,” Father had said. “It would be nice if the Bomardi children didn’t see the future King of Evermore bested by his sister.”

Briony still didn’t comprehend it until the results of the first exams came in and Father started asking her to switch entire assignments with Rory. Hours upon hours of work she did over the next five years were often given to her brother, and she had to gather what she could from his scraps.

She never forgave her father for that, not even in his death.

Briony took a deep breath and curled her fingers toward her palm, summoning a small vial filled with water into her hand. She held it up to Rory.

“This is water from the lake. It’s the same water in the castle’s well and the Eversun school’s well.” Briony swallowed, thinking of the thousands of Eversun families who were sheltering at the school across the lake until this war was done. “When you cast the protection, pour this onto your hands and place the last drop on your tongue. The lake, Claremore Castle, and the school will all link under one shield connected to you.”

Rory took it from her, nodding. “General Meers doesn’t like this plan, by the way.”

“He doesn’t understand it. He’s not a Rosewood,” Briony said.

Their Rosewood bloodline was strong with protection magic—shields, borders, and wards. It was one of the main reasons they were predestined to rule, according to Briony and Rory’s father. He, their grandfather, and all the men behind them were celebrated peacetime rulers. Rory was the first Rosewood to know war in over five hundred years.

“The general values offensive magic. That’s his job,” Briony continued. “But it’s your job as king and as a Rosewood to protect our people.”

“What’s left of them,” said Rory, the exhaustion in his voice clear.

Over the past four years of war, they’d been beaten farther and farther south, losing their ground and losing people. It wasn’t land that Bomard truly wanted. It wasn’t the captives taken along the way—though that was always a plus for the power-hungry Bomardi. It was Rory. It was the end to the Heir Twice Over.

Briony placed her hand on his. “It will be over soon. Today is the day.”

“What if it isn’t?” Rory asked, the words tumbling out quickly. His eyes pleaded with her.

“It is.” Briony’s voice was stronger than she felt. She smiled reassuringly. “The eclipse. Everyone knows it’s today. *When the sun shines at night, he who will bring an end to war—*”

Rory yanked his hand from her. “Don’t quote the prophecy to me. Six-hundred-year-old nonsense.”

He stood and went to the window overlooking her writing desk. Briony watched him lean forward on the ledge, like a child wishing he could play outside. She ran her fingers over the duvet, thinking of the old prophecy that had haunted Rory for four years now.

*When the sun shines at night, he who will bring an end to war on this land shall be victorious. He shall be an heir, twice over, and a rightful sovereign over the continent.*

The prophecy was from more than half a millennium ago. When it hadn’t come true at the end of the Moreland civil war that split the continent into Evermore and Bomard, many had forgotten about it. But four years ago, at the outbreak of the new conflict, everyone began wondering if Rory was the one prophesied.

Briony’s eyes drifted to the papers and correspondence on her desk—the

letters she'd received back from the countries across the sea stating that they could not send aid, but that they would accept the Rosewoods and their court warmly in a retreat; the *Journal* page that updated daily with the news from the realm; the victory speech she'd written for Rory; the maps with all the locations of Eversun safe houses.

She cleared her throat. "You have to kill her," Briony said softly. "It has to end. Completely."

Briony hadn't even said Mallow's name, and yet a cold wind settled inside her chest.

Rory pressed his lips together. "I know."

"You'll have to use Heartstop if nothing else is working—"

"I know, Briony," he said harshly. He sniffed. "Sorry. I . . . I will. General Meers and I have been practicing on . . ."

His voice trailed off. Briony didn't want to know which small animals or birds around Claremore had been disappearing.

Heartstop was outlawed in Evermore. Of all the heart magic, Heartstop, the crushing of a heart within its owner's chest, took the heaviest toll on a magician. The first taking of a human life ripped one's own heart, and every subsequent kill sliced further and further. Rory had had to learn this complex magic from scratch, as only Bomardi used heart magic. Just as only Eversuns used mind magic.

It was this divide between the two countries that Veronika Mallow had seized upon. Bomard had been radicalized under her, believing that the Eversuns' mind magic was mind *control*, instead of what it simply was: a different source from which to pull magic. There were differences between the disciplines, too—certain mind magic spells could never be mastered by a heart magician, and vice versa, but the true difference was the source of power. Magic pulled from the mind did not exhaust the body, whereas magic from the heart took a greater physical toll. Heart magicians had always needed to rely on animal familiars to keep their strength for prolonged magic use.

Or worse.

Under Mallow's influence, some Bomardi had taken it all a step further. Why use an animal when you could use a person. Another magician's

heart could give you much more power than an animal's, and creating a bond—a heartspring bond—would ensure that your own heart wasn't being exhausted.

There was a screech outside the window, and in tense silence, they both watched Mallow's familiar beat its black wings against the sky. The last dragon in the known world, the creature whose name had been lost to time, had begun circling at dawn.

There were times Briony didn't blame the Bomardi for following Mallow. She, too, might have put her faith in the mage able to bond with the last dragon. Not to mention the untold power Mallow received from that bond—the strength of magic and the access to skills that a heart magician could never acquire from a more common animal, or even a heartspring. Bonded to the dragon, Mallow might live two lifespans, like the last mage who'd bonded with it. The Dragon Lord, as he was called in the history books, had lived more than one hundred and fifty years. And it wasn't just a long life that Mallow had with the dragon bond. It was widely known that with the dragon's magic, Mallow could read thoughts, a trait heretofore only known among the most experienced *mind* magicians.

They watched the dragon sail until she disappeared over the ocean again.

Briony refocused her attention as Rory turned from the window. He looked at her with the same expression from when they were younger, like he needed the answer to a tutor's question.

"Do you believe the prophecy is about me? Really? In your heart, Briony?"

Briony was still as she answered without a waver in her voice, "Yes."

Rory watched her for hesitation, but she did not show it.

There was a knock on the door, and Briony jumped.

Rory sighed. "That'll be Didion, then."

Her lips pulled down into a frown.

Rory laughed. "Don't be mean to him!" he said. "He may die today, you know."

"Don't say such a thing."

"It's true!" Rory ran for the door and pulled it open. "Isn't it true, Did?" Didion's lanky frame stood sheepishly in the doorway.

"Isn't what true?" he asked, peering at Briony and Rory from below messy dark hair.

"That you may die today," Rory said simply.

"Oh. Yes. Very sad."

Briony rolled her eyes and sat up tall on her featherbed. "Glad you two have a solid outlook on things."

Didion smiled and cleared his throat.

Rory clapped his hands together. "I have to find Cordelia. Is it all right if I leave you two unchaperoned?"

Briony parted her lips to protest, but Rory was already halfway out the door.

"We've been alone plenty of times," Didion said with a laugh.

Rory grabbed the doorframe and swung back inside. "You can die for *certain* today if you keep saying things like that."

Briony squawked, and a pink blush overtook Didion's olive skin.

"As if *you* aren't off to be *unchaperoned* yourself!" she yelled. Briony grabbed one of her pillows and threw it at her brother's head. With a flick of his wrist, he split the pillow apart in midair. Feathers floated everywhere, and Rory ran out, disappearing in the cloud of fluff.

Groaning, Briony twisted her palms toward her chest, gathering the feathers and floating them into the trash bin.

Once the place was clean again, she was alone with Didion for the first time in a year. He looked over her bedroom, searching her desk and the paintings that hung on her walls.

"Is it comfortable here for you?" he asked, raising his full eyebrows at her.

"I like it. I miss Biltmore Palace, but what can you do?" She shrugged. And immediately felt very awkward. "What can you do"—as if they'd lost the coastal palace in a coin toss instead of a siege.

His gaze focused on her teacup, next to her books. The same teacup whose steam she had been manipulating into the memory of a different boy only ten minutes ago. He hovered his index finger over the liquid and

brought its temperature up again. The steam wisped upward as he held the teacup out to her.

“Here,” he said with a shy smile.

Briony tried not to wince as she took the cup and he sat down next to her on her mattress.

“It’s been a while since we’ve been properly alone together,” Didion said.

Briony nodded. That had been her idea. When the stress of the tactical meetings and tension within the castle walls had become too much, she and Didion used to take walks together at night by the docks near Biltmore Palace, escaping prying eyes and inquisitive ears. He listened while she confided her frustrations about General Meers’s strategies, and soon the walks began to end with soft kisses, like they’d shared in school. And then the kisses began to end with hands under fabrics.

Didion was gentle and patient. His hands seemed to spend hours fumbling to find just the right spot between her thighs, and once he found it, he quickly lost it, but Briony just smiled when he would ask if she enjoyed herself. Perhaps there was supposed to be more . . . enjoyment. Briony *hoped* at least. Perhaps when a bed was brought into it, things became easier, but she refused to let Didion into her bed. As the sister of the king, she’d already allowed Didion many liberties that only a husband should have.

It had been her idea to pause things between them after the retreat from Biltmore Palace, even though Didion was a comfortable choice. Safe. Kind. Her father would have been happy to see her married to Didion Winchester. Her brother, too. Briony often wondered why she didn’t *want* comfortable, safe, kind.

“I was hoping to ask you for your favor today,” he said, staring down at his hands.

Sipping to stall for time, Briony watched his thumbs circle each other. “Oh?”

“Perhaps I could wear your pin into the field today?”

Her fingers jumped for the silver brooch. “It’s my mother’s,” she said quickly, ignoring her use of the present tense. “I’ve never taken it off. I can’t part with it, I’m sorry.”

"No, of course, right," he stuttered. "Not exactly your pin then. A lock of hair?"

"That's . . . also my mother's," she quipped awkwardly. All portraits of her mother had borne a striking resemblance to Briony as she'd aged to her twenty-five years—coincidentally, the same age at which her mother had died giving birth to Briony and Rory. "I don't. . ." Briony cleared her throat. "Is it necessary? Can't I just wish you well? You and my brother both?"

He nodded, blushing softly. "That's fine. I had only hoped . . . Well, if I could know that I had someone to come home to. . ."

"Come home?" She laughed. "You'll be hardly a mile away—"

"I'm trying to ask formally, and you're making it very hard." He ran a hand through his dark hair.

"There's nothing to ask," she said firmly. "Until this is over, we don't know if I'll need to be useful in some other way."

He looked at her sharply. "You mean a peace treaty betrothal? Rory wouldn't do that to you."

"He won't have a choice! He's thought of nothing but battle tactics for four years now, but after today, he'll need to start thinking like the King of Evermore." She set down her teacup, remembering the boy in the steam. "There have been plenty of marriages between Bomard and Evermore to sustain the treaty."

"Don't sound so excited," Didion mumbled.

Her head snapped to him. "What?"

He sighed and stood from her bed. "Briony, please just tell me that you'll be happy if I live through today. That's all I ask."

"Of course I'll be happy if you live through today—"

"Wonderful. Thank you," he said. And before she could form another sentence, he was out the door, closing it behind him with a soft click.

She groaned and fell back on her bed. She wasn't being purposefully evasive. Aside from two cousins, she was the only woman left in the Rosewood line who could be offered as a human sacrifice to a political marriage. Rory probably couldn't hold that thought in his head, but a political marriage would go a long way in restoring trust once today was over. There were many families in the Bomardi line of succession who weren't

bloodthirsty vengeance seekers. A marriage between herself and a young Bomardi within the line wouldn't have to be a life of torture.

There were some with whom she'd attended school who looked down on the Eversuns but hadn't been so outwardly despicable. Finn Raquin with his dark skin and darker eyes was half Eversun himself; his parents had been one such convenient marriage. The Raquin patriarch was fourteenth in line for the highest position of power in Bomard—the Seat. Finn was a cad, but he wasn't evil.

On the other hand, evil had a face with Canning Trow. With wide-set eyes and pasty skin, Canning was terrible to look at, with a soul that was just as bleak. It had been common knowledge to steer clear of him in the dark corridors at school. The only reason he walked as if he owned the place was that he did. His mother was third in line for the Seat, and his father's family owned the entire mountain that the Bomardi school grounds were carved into.

There were several young men who were cruel only when it was convenient for them, like Lorne Vult and Liam Quill, though word was that Liam Quill was more interested in Lorne and Finn than extending his family line—sixth though his father was.

And then there was someone far harder to decipher. Icy cold most days, only to thaw at the oddest moments. With strong hands and opaque eyes, a wicked mouth and a silver tongue. Who inspired as much fear and uncertainty in her chest as he did yearning.

Briony shook her thoughts loose. It was useless to dwell on such things. She glanced at her teacup. It was cold again. The steam gone on a sigh.

\* \* \*

A few hours later, Briony stood in the castle courtyard, watching her brother kiss her best friend goodbye. Cordelia wrapped her arms around Rory's shoulders much more affectionately than was considered proper, but there weren't many people who cared about propriety in these dark days.

"Disgusting," said a voice on her left.

Briony grinned at her cousin Finola. She was tugging her gloves on and frowning playfully at Rory and Cordelia's display of affection.

Briony chuckled. "That will be you one day, you know."

"Not if I can help it," Finola said, winking at her. She flipped her honey-blond braid over her shoulder. "I'll see you when this is over, yeah?"

Briony nodded. Finola ran for the corner of the courtyard, the only location in the castle one could portal out of. Briony longed to ask where Finola was off to, but she wasn't given access to that kind of information, much to her disappointment.

Off to her right, General Billium Meers spoke softly to Anna Wevin, Briony's personal guard. Anna was, in fact, the only woman aside from Finola whom Briony had ever seen General Meers give any respect to. Certainly not Briony, when she used to sit in on strategy meetings, which always seemed to devolve into arguments. The general prioritized aggression in their attacks, to the point of callous risk-taking, and Briony was always quick to remind Rory about defense, shields, and protecting their people. At some point in the past two years, General Meers had convinced Rory that, out of caution and efficiency, military strategy meetings should involve essential advisers only, and then Briony was barred. Rory briefed her in private now. He could have named her an adviser, but he hadn't, and she wouldn't suggest such a thing.

Anna saluted the general and came to stand three paces behind Briony, as she had her entire life. General Meers gave Briony a cursory nod, which she returned with a glare.

The general's son, on the other hand, could not have been more opposite from his father.

Sammy Meers with his russet-brown hair, rosy skin, and cheery blue eyes came to a stop in front of Briony. He swept the ground in a deep bow and grabbed her hand before she could pull it back.

"Miss Briony Rosewood," he said loudly, "though you offer me your favor today, I cannot accept it."

Briony tugged her hand back. "Stop it!" she hissed, cheeks flushing as she caught Didion rolling his eyes at Sammy's theatrics.