

Betrothed

By

Renee Rose

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Prologue

“Take off your clothes.”

Julia swallowed. As her trembling fingers undid the laces on her bodice, she stole a peek at her husband's face. As usual, it was inscrutable. But he had been worried about her, and she knew from experience that his worry quickly morphed into anger.

She slowly slid out of her dress and her shift, feeling acutely aware of her nudity as he watched her from where he sat on the edge of the bed.

“Come here.”

Her feet reluctantly carried her to stand before him. But he hadn't asked her to fetch his belt—that was some relief.

She was already over his knee feeling the sting of his strong hand on her bared bottom when he asked, “Why am I spanking you?”

He was spanking her fast and hard and it was difficult to answer him between her gasps. She turned her face to the side, out of the blankets so he could hear her. “For coming back to the castle after dark?” she managed to choke out.

“I was *worried* about you, Julia!” He did not pause for a moment from his task of chastising every part of her upturned bottom. “Why did you not bring a servant with you when you went to pick blackberries?”

“I just—” His hand continued raining down her punishment. “—wanted— to be alone,” she gasped.

He paused then and rubbed her smarting flesh, a tender act that was sometimes as effective at producing tears as a spanking. Indeed, the tears came freely now.

“I can understand that,” he said. “But *falling asleep* out there by yourself?” He started spanking again, just as hard, and this time she wept. Then his hand stopped abruptly, mid stroke. She held still, her muscles twitching and flinching in anticipation of the next spank. But it did not come. He lifted her back up slowly and turned her around so she sat straddling him, giving her an idea of the direction this punishment might be taking.

“Julia, why do you think you've been taking so many naps lately?” he asked, studying her face. Still weeping, she wiped at her tears with the back of her hand. Bronson must have realized she wasn't composed enough to talk yet, because he pulled her in to snuffle in his neck. He stroked her back and her heated bottom and thighs and whispered comforting words to her.

“I'm just thinking... the moon is full again and you never had your monthly courses.”

She sat straight up in surprise, her tears evaporating completely. “You're right! Do you think it could be?” She clapped a hand over her mouth, her eyes dancing.

Bronson smiled brightly. “It would explain all the napping and forgetfulness.”

They beamed at each other for a moment and then she leaned forward and nipped at his ear with her teeth. “Why couldn't you have thought of that *before* you spanked me?”

Bronson roared with laughter. “Do you think that would've saved your pretty little bottom?” He fell back onto the bed and pulled her on top of him. “Think again, little flower,” he said, squeezing the part in question affectionately. “Think again.”

Chapter One

“STAND DOWN!” Bronson, Duke of Pembridge and Earl of Montmore bellowed at the two men engaged in what appeared to be mortal combat below him. He kicked his horse and pulled him around to find a safe path down the steep bluff from which he was looking down. God's teeth, the man on top was trying to *rape* the boy below him. The boy was struggling wildly, kneeling the aggressor between the legs and writhing to get free, but the man on top maintained an upper hand, striking his face and pulling his leggings down... but you can't mount a boy from that angle. A girl, then. Dressed as a boy. It must be.

He kicked his horse even harder, shouting again, “STAND DOWN. Get off NOW!” But the boy— woman— whatever, had her own salvation in the form of a dagger, which she used in one swift thrust up under the ribs of her assailant. The bigger man collapsed on top of her small figure. Closing the distance, he watched as she struggled frantically to get out from under him.

He'd nearly reached them by now. “HOLD!” he called out, but the boy— girl—woman— whatever looked at him with pure terror and took off running into the woods. He cursed and gave chase, his knights and soldiers stopping to see to the stab victim. “Hold!” he demanded again.

It was easy enough to head her off on mount. He simply blocked her path, putting the chest of his huge destrier close enough that she had to back up against a tree to avoid being stepped on. He dismounted. She was breathing in little sobs and her eyes looked wild. He took a good look at her. Her cap had fallen off to reveal hair was cut short like a boy's. She was dressed in the fine clothes of a knight's page, which were now covered in blood.

“Easy now,” he spoke reassuringly. He took her shoulders gently. “I saw what happened.” In a lower voice, “I saw what he was trying to do to you.”

Her eyes snapped up to his, wide with question. Probably wondering if he knew her secret. He was surprised to find he felt a strong urge to protect her.

As he inspected her up close, he was almost certain that she was female. She had fine, delicate features, small ears and slender fingers. Her skin shone with good health and breeding— a peachy cream sprinkled with freckles. Her hair was the most amazing color— neither brown nor blond, nor red, but something in between all three— a burnished copper that literally shone in the filtered summer light. The eyes were a startling shade of pale green with thick, dark lashes. If she wasn't female, then she was the unluckiest boy ever born. It was possible. The dead man might have assumed him to be female and been wrong. And if that were the case, he wasn't about to unman the boy more by saying anything. He'd wait until he was absolutely certain.

“He did not succeed, did he?” he asked her gently.

She shook her head. She'd been hurt in the fight— one cheek was already swelling with what would be a nasty bruise and her lower lip was bleeding and swollen.

“What's your name?”

“Jake. It's Jake.” Her eyes pleaded with him not to contradict her. Definitely a lady.

He allowed his eyebrows to rise just a little. Andrew and John, his two most trusted knights joined them.

“What happened back there, *Jake*?”

“I had stopped for supper and to make camp there and he—” the girl swallowed. “He came out of the trees and attacked. He robbed me—took the jewels I was carrying.” She didn't go on and he couldn't blame her.

“Who are you and why are you traveling alone?”

"I was a page to... the Duke of Pembridge..."

Andrew snorted. Bronson shot him a warning look and kept his own face perfectly straight. The Duke of Pembridge, indeed. Clearly she had no idea she was standing before said Duke.

"...but he wasn't happy with my services, so I'm returning home."

Bronson's eyebrows came together. A strange twist to her lie, condemning herself in that way.

"You ran away?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Were the horse and jewels yours to take?"

She hesitated and flushed a little. "The jewels were. The horse I will return as soon as I am able."

Another snort from Andrew.

She was looking up at him through her lashes in a way only a woman would. She lacked talent at her charade as a boy. Naming him as her former master was an unlucky choice, but the rest he would guess she kept as close to the truth as she could. She had stolen a horse and run away, with her own jewels. She had pluck, he'd give her that. And he was determined to get the rest of the story out of her.

"I am Bronson, Earl of Montmore. These two men are my knights Andrew and John." He *was* the Earl of Montmore. In addition to being the Duke of Pembridge. It was his second title and he'd rather not call her out on her lie yet.

"My lord... could you use a page?" She shifted nervously. "Not a permanent one, but for now, while you travel? What I mean is, mayhap I could travel with you and be of some service?"

He folded his arms across his chest. "Tell me, why was the Duke of Pembridge unhappy with your services?" As he spoke his name he gave the slightest lift of his eyebrows, for his knights' benefit. He saw them smirk.

She blinked at him. "Well, to be honest," she said, "The Duke is a difficult man to please. He has a ghastly temper and he beat me indiscriminately." She looked at him, wide eyed and serious.

He nearly choked, himself, at that. Andrew's shoulders shook with silent laughter and John rolled his eyes and shook his head.

"Well, how do you know I wouldn't be the same sort of master?"

Her eyes dropped to the ground and she kicked at a stone with the tip of her very feminine looking calf-skin boots. "I can just tell."

"How old are you?"

"Thirteen, my lord."

"How could you be of service to me? What talents do you have, Jake?"

"I'm a better archer than most, and I'm great with horses."

"Not bad with a dagger, either," Sir John muttered.

At that, she looked stricken. "Is he dead?" she asked in a very quiet voice.

"Aye."

She paled and then turned a shade green. She turned away from them and vomited. Again that protective urge swept over him and he put a hand on her back, lending his strength through its touch. "Your first kill?" he asked gently.

"Aye."

* * *

The man who had chased her down had the kindest eyes. Once she'd looked into them, she'd felt all the terror drain out of her. He was young and handsome in a rugged sort of way— curly brown

hair, strong jaw, broad chest and shoulders. He couldn't be more than five and twenty years old and had the dress and command of nobility.

He put his hand on her back while she vomited, waiting patiently for her to finish, comforting her in the way a man comforts a boy. But he knew she wasn't a boy, didn't he? He'd seen what that ruffian had been trying to do to her. And although it should have upset her that he knew, for some reason she found it reassuring. As if she wasn't in this alone, anymore. Since she'd run away from the king's castle to avoid her marriage, she'd felt unbelievably alone and lost.

And he hadn't revealed her secret to his men. As soon as the words had come out of her mouth asking to be his page, she knew she wanted desperately for him to take her on. She felt safer near him. She wanted to stay with this man, or at least travel with him until she figured out where to go.

"Let me think about taking you on as a page. In the meantime, though, I'm going to advise you not to tell that story again about you being page to the Duke of Pembridge. It doesn't speak in your favor."

She thought she heard his knights snickering at that.

"Yes, my lord."

"Come," he said, leading her back toward the dead man. "The dead man is your burden now. You must deal him."

Though her gut clenched at that, Julia followed him as commanded. There were twenty men or so by now— an entire troop of his, gathered around the body. They had rolled the man onto his back and the blood had soaked through his clothes and pooled around him. So much blood. She threw up again to the snickering of his men. Then she panicked.

"Where are my jewels?"

"These jewels?" asked one of the men, holding up the leather pouch that held her valuables. She felt the threads of desperation creeping back into her voice.

"They're mine! I swear it! I can describe every piece to you!"

The hand on her shoulder was the Earl's again. "Relax, young Jake. It is not our habit to steal. If you can, indeed describe the jewels they will be returned to you." He held out his hands and the pouch was tossed to him. He tucked it under his sword belt and when her eyes followed, he patted it reassuringly.

She caught herself almost curtsying to that and quickly switched it to a bow. "I thank you, my lord." She hoped he was sincere.

"What shall we do with the body?" he asked her. There was a didactic tone to his voice— as if she truly were his page and this was a teaching opportunity.

"Uh, well, bury it?"

He shook his head. "Nay, lad."

"Burn it?" she asked doubtfully.

The corners of his mouth started to curl at that, but he smoothed them back out. He shook his head. "No."

She pleaded with him with her eyes. "Please tell me."

"Best we bring it to the closest village in case he belongs there. He may be mourned by family."

Of course. She felt foolish. "Will you help me to get him on my horse, then?"

The Earl grinned at that. She was making a complete arse out of herself.

"I'm thinking we'll put him in a wagon. But not 'til the morrow. We'll stop here for the night." He raised his voice a little at that last statement and his men all started to move at once, organizing to pitch their camp.

"You go and wash the blood out of your clothing as best you can," he said, lifting his chin

toward the sound of a nearby stream. Then he frowned. “Do you have any other clothes?” He was imagining her problems undressing near his men. She nodded and went to the small pack on her horse where she had a clean linen undershirt and leggings. She didn't have a second tunic— talking the page at the castle into lending her these clothes had been difficult enough. She would just have to do her best to scrub out the blood.

She headed to the stream and walked downstream a while until she felt she had enough privacy. The real difficulty was that the linen she'd used to bind her breasts was also blood-soaked. She took off the tunic, undershirt and leggings, and put on the pair of clean leggings. Then she began to unwind the bloodied wrap. When it was off, she put the clean undershirt on. It was a thin linen, so if anyone saw her like that, they would surely see her breasts through the fabric. She began scrubbing the stained clothing and wrap with sand from the stream bed. The smell of blood nearly made her heave again. In the end, she decided to wrap the wet fabric back around her breasts, and then cover the undershirt with the wet tunic. It was uncomfortable, but at least she was safely covered.

She returned to a neatly pitched camp. Tents were pitched in a ring, with a fire burning in the middle. There was a pot on the fire and seeing it made her belly rumble. She hadn't had a hot meal in the four days since she'd fled from the king's castle.

It was some kind of mutton stew with boiled beets on the side. She ate every last bite and would've licked the bowl if it were considered polite.

“You'll sleep in my tent,” the Earl told her, sauntering over after the meal. She froze. Mayhap he hadn't told anyone her secret because he meant to abuse her himself in the privacy of his own tent.

She met his eyes and he frowned slightly. He had guessed her thoughts. “I intend to keep you safe,” he said in a voice low enough that only she could hear.

Right. Safely tucked into your tent for your exclusive use. But for some reason, she actually believed him. It was the eyes, she thought. Though he seemed to be a strong and decisive leader, his eyes regarded her with kindness. She exhaled and again had to stop herself mid-curtsy. She gave him her deepest bow and after collecting her bedroll from her horse, followed him to his tent. The interior was tall enough that he could stand in it without ducking and he was above-average in height. His bedroll was spread out against one side and there were two wooden stools. A bag of his belongings was next to his bedroll. That was the extent of it.

She looked around, trying to decide where to spread her bedroll out and he pointed to the opposite wall from his. That gave her a small measure of comfort. When she finished spreading it out, he handed her one of his undershirts.

“Here. Take off your wet tunic. That can't be comfortable.”

He was gentleman enough to turn his back and busy himself with his things. She also turned her back before she slipped the tunic off. Her undershirt was wet in the center from the breast binding wrap, but it would dry quickly without the tunic on. She pulled his enormous undershirt over the top of hers and then reached underneath both shirts to unwind the linen wrap. She stretched up to try to tuck both pieces of wet clothing into one of the tent poles to hang dry.

“Allow me.”

She jumped. She hadn't heard him stepping up behind her, but he was quite close now, his voice right at her ear. He took the wet fabric from her hands and reached up where she couldn't. Her heart beat faster. His tunic was off now too, and the thin linen undershirt revealed a hard muscled chest and arms. Her breath caught. She should not be here. With him. Like this. But what other option did she have? All she could do was pray he was the gentleman he appeared to be. He hung the clothing and then turned to face her, still far too close— too virile— for her comfort. Her eyes traveled from his chest up to his face and when she met his eyes, she found he was regarding her with a heavy-lidded stare. She took a step backward and he diffused the tension, offering her one of the stools to sit on. He

sat on the other and faced her.

“And now, you will tell me the truth,” he pronounced.

* * *

In the candlelight, in his tent, she was even more lovely than she had been in the daylight. Her copper hair practically glowed and the shadows on her face made her lashes seem even longer. There was not a shadow of a doubt left that she was female—the bound breasts were his final clue. Now without the binding, even through the two undershirts he could see their subtle curves—like small apples waiting to be... He stopped himself from taking that thought any further. God's teeth, she was beautiful enough to make a man groan.

She was also more than a little afraid of him and the situation in which she'd put herself. So he got down to business.

“And now you will tell me the truth.”

She sucked in her breath and looked at him warily. Then she sighed, defeated. She nodded slowly. “I do not wish to marry the man I am betrothed to,” she said slowly.

“So you ran away?”

“Aye.”

“Why do you object to him?”

“It is complicated.”

“You have a lover.”

“Certainly not!” her indignation made him smile. He had guessed by her blushes that she was a maid, but now he was sure.

“You love another man?”

“No. No, nothing like that.”

“What then?”

She sat quietly long enough that he didn't think she was going to answer him. But then she said, “He was the sworn enemy of my father, responsible for the deaths of my father and brothers. And now I've been given to him as a sort of war prize so that he may have rights to the property that belonged to my father.” Bitterness threaded through her voice and her eyes filled with unshed tears. She blinked them back and took a deep breath. “You see, I *can't* marry him,” she croaked.

He let that hang in the silence for a moment. “So what is your plan? Do you have one?”

She flushed. “I have relatives in Normandy. I am hoping they will provide me with amnesty.”

He considered it. Whether her intended would go looking that far for her depended on how much wealth was tied up in the marriage contract, he supposed. Or how angry he would be at having her disappear before it could be fulfilled. If he were her Normandy relative, he would not harbor her unless he was willing to do battle with her intended. And all that was assuming she made it to Normandy. God's teeth, a lovely maiden traveling alone to Normandy! Even dressed as a page, it was difficult to believe she'd make it at all, but even more-so to believe she'd arrive with her virtue still intact. Especially considering how inept she was at playing a boy. That fierce welling of protectiveness filled him again. He would take her as far as he could. But better yet would be to convince her to return home.

“What is your name?”

She blinked at him and didn't answer. He sighed. “You don't want to tell me?”

She shook her head. “I think it would be best if I did not.”

“Is it Jacquelyn?”

She giggled a little and though it should have irritated him, instead he found the sound was as

sweet as music. “No, but you may call me that if you like.”

He rolled his eyes.

“How old are you, really?”

“Eighteen.”

“And you begrudge your intended too much to marry him.”

Her brows furrowed. “Nay, my lord. I do not begrudge him. It is the other way 'round. It was my father who wronged him.” She looked at him as if that explained everything.

“So what is your objection?”

“My objection!” she spluttered indignantly. “The man will make the rest of my life a living hell. That is, *if* he doesn't simply send me to a nunnery. And I have no desire to put him to the test, either way.”

“I see.”

“Do you?” she asked with a touch of sullenness. “Can you understand the cruelty of requiring a woman to marry the mortal enemy of her family? A lady is helpless in her husband's hands. He can beat her indiscriminately, imprison her, and take any liberty he likes with her. There is nothing at all she can do to escape his rule.”

She held a rather bleak idea of marriage.

“How do you know for certain that your intended holds you responsible for your father's deeds?”

She looked at him warily and picked at her nails. “Well, I don't. I did not wait to meet him. And I'm not saying he holds me responsible. How could I be responsible for what my father has done?”

“How indeed?”

“But that does not mean he would not resent me or wish to punish me for being his daughter.”

“What exactly did your father do?”

She sighed and looked at her hands. “He tried to steal his holdings.”

“I see. Well, there's really nothing personal about that. It happens often enough. I shouldn't think your betrothed would be *so* insulted. Of course, it depends on the man, I suppose. He is particularly hard-hearted?”

“I-I think so.”

“But you've never met him, so you really do not know, do you?”

“I tell you that I did not care to meet him,” she snapped defensively.

He held up his hand. “All right, all right. Calm yourself. It just seems to me that escaping your fate may be more difficult than you think. Won't your betrothed come looking for you? And if he does, will your family be willing to go to battle with him over you?”

The girl stared at him in shocked silence, the despair in her pale green eyes evident. She had not considered that scenario. She shook her head slowly. “I—I could not ask them to, even if they would. My intended could raise an army big enough to defeat any opponent, I fear.”

“I think you should return, little one. You cannot escape your fate, but you can make the best of it. Be sweet to your husband—and I'm sure he'll be fair with you.”

Her brows lowered into a glower. “You're sure? You don't know this man. He is ruthless on the battlefield and he did not hesitate to crush my father's troops. Why would he show any kindness to me?”

“Well, think it over. The longer you avoid him, the angrier he will be when he finally finds you. Not to mention you'll have trouble from whomever it is who made the marriage contract on your behalf.”

“Aye,” she said heavily.

“Go lie down. Get some rest. You've had a long day,” he said.

“My lord?” she said hesitantly.

He raised his eyebrows.

“What about my jewels?”

He chuckled. He'd been waiting to see how long it took her to ask for them. “Ah, yes.” He picked up the bag. “Describe them to me,” he said peering into it.

“Ruby ring, rectangular cut. A wedding gift to my mother from my father. String of pearls. Belonged to my grandmother. Given to me on my sixteenth birthday. Sapphire pendant on a silver chain— my mother's...”

He chuckled again and tossed the pouch to her. She looked surprised, as if she hadn't really been sure he would return them.

“Thank you, my lord.”

“Good night, little one.”

He laid down on his own bedroll and blew out the candle.

He woke to the sound of sniffing. He'd probably just fallen asleep. He listened silently for a while, but when it didn't let up, he climbed out of his blankets and went to her. Her back was to him, but her stiffness told him that she knew he was there. He sat beside her and put a hand on her back. When she didn't protest, he moved it to her head, smoothing her hair back from her face, tracing her ear with his fingertips. He tried to keep his touch light and undemanding. The last thing he wanted was for her to fear him.

“You can stay here with me for as long as you like,” he heard himself promising, and wondered what had come over him. She had come over him. This delicate, beautiful lady, who had dressed like a page and murdered a thief with her own knife. Too bad he couldn't claim her as his own because something about her made him want to defend her for the rest of his life.

Her tears stopped and she lay there quietly, not acknowledging, but still allowing his touch. Eventually her breath deepened and she fell asleep. He wanted to kiss her forehead, but he didn't risk waking her. Wide awake now, he slipped out of his tent to that of his knights.

“If that's a boy, I'll eat my boots!” Andrew muttered without turning, sensing Bronson's presence behind him. The knights were still awake, playing a game of dice by candlelight. He grinned at them.

“Indeed. Not a boy but a lady, run off to avoid her betrothal,” he smirked.

The men chuckled.

“Not that you mind sharing your tent with her,” John ribbed him.

“Not a bit. Far more interesting than you men, I'll tell you that.”

“What will you do with her?”

He shrugged. “I told her she could travel with us as far as she likes. But in the meantime, I hope to make her see reason. Running away will only make her situation worse.”

“Aye. Especially if she gets herself involved with the horrible Duke of Pembridge!” Andrew's eyebrows waggled for effect.

“*Indeed.*”