



Shipwrecked with Her Irish Warrior (The MacEgan Brothers)

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Category: YA&Teen

Description: Adriana de Manzano is more than a lady-in-waiting to the future Queen of England—she has sworn to defend Berengaria to the death! When they are shipwrecked on their voyage to the Holy Land, Adriana knows that her only hope of survival lies with the fiercely handsome Irishman.

Liam MacEgan is intrigued by the beautiful Adriana, and he'll stop at nothing to rescue her and the princess from their imprisonment on Cyprus. He fights alongside the king to save them, but he hides a secret of his own . . . that he is a prince of Ireland searching for his own bride.

(This story was formerly published as *Lionhearts Bride*)

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Off the coast of Cyprus April 12, 1191

Liam MacEgan hated ships. Though he'd spent many years of his life exploring the waters of his native éireann, being trapped aboard a wooden vessel for months was somewhere between purgatory and hellfire.

It was your idea to go on Crusade, he reminded himself. He'd believed he was embarking on an adventure, to see the Holy Land and fight to free Jerusalem. His family had been firmly opposed to it. His father, King Patrick of Laochre, had demanded that he face his responsibilities as a future provincial king.

But he'd needed an escape from his homeland. He'd grown up listening to the stories of distant lands, told to him by his uncle Trahern. He longed to see the glittering foreign cities and taste new foods. He needed this last chance to see the worlds that were forbidden to him . . . to feel the sting of desert sand against his face . . . to learn the secrets of exotic women.

And so, defying his family's wishes, he'd slipped out one night and arranged passage to France, to join in the service of the King Richard, Coeur de Lion.

Liam stared out at the fierce blue of the Mediterranean, and a bittersweet tang of homesickness caught him. The sky was a dark gray, and clouds rolled in the distance. He was dimly aware of a woman moving along the side of the boat, just behind the oarsmen. Her long dark hair was covered by a veil, but the length of it stirred in the sea winds.

Adriana, daughter of the Vicomte de Manzano, was one of Princess Berengaria's

ladies. She was a dark beauty, with olive skin and raven hair. Her hands curved over the wood of the ship, and she turned back to stare at the waves.

He wanted to go and talk to her, but he sensed it would be an intrusion of her time alone. Her eyes lifted to the darkening skies, as though she were afraid.

Instinct made him glance behind him, and he spied the Count of Berduria staring at the young woman. The unrestrained lust on the man's face made Liam cross over to Lady Adriana's side. Though she shied away from him, he said in a low voice, "Don't be afraid. I came to offer my protection, not to disturb you."

When she sent him a confused look, he added, "The count is watching." At that, Lady Adriana settled her gaze back upon the sea. Liam wasn't certain whether or not she wanted him to stay. "Would you rather I left you alone with him?"

"Stay," she whispered. "Unless your intent is the same as his." She shivered in the wind, rubbing her shoulders. Liam unfastened his cloak and settled it around her shoulders. It was meant to offer her warmth, but it also sent an unmistakable message to the count.

She pulled the cloak around her. "You're one of King Richard's men, aren't you?"

"I chose to fight at his side, aye. But I am not his vassal." He refrained from mentioning anything further, not wanting to admit his own rank. During this journey, he'd told no one that he was an Irish prince, save King Richard. He wanted to experience life as a common man, as a soldier. It had meant giving up the luxuries he'd come to enjoy, but in return, he'd seen a side of life that his family had tried to protect him from.

"Has King Richard spoken of the princess?" Adriana asked. "My lady Berengaria worries that he seems so . . . distant, ever since the new betrothal."

Liam shrugged. "His Grace is preoccupied with the journey to the Holy Land. He's eager to fight for Jerusalem." He paused a moment and asked, "What of you? Do you intend to travel wherever the princess wishes to go? Even to the Holy Land?"

She nodded. "She has no choice, any more than I do." The young woman clasped her hands together as she stared out at the sea.

"You could marry or return to your family," he suggested. "Jerusalem is dangerous for a woman."

"Not for me."

He stared at her, and she sent him a confident smile. "I have four brothers. I know how to protect myself."

"How?" He moved closer, until his knee brushed the edge of her silk gown.

The tip of a knife touched the soft skin above his throat. "Like this." Adriana's dark brown eyes were dancing with amusement. "You wouldn't be likely to harm me now, would you?" She removed the blade and offered it back to him.

Son of Belenus, it was his own blade. She'd somehow stolen it from his belt without him even sensing her.

"How did you do that?"

Her face transformed with a knowing smile. "You should know better than to underestimate a stranger. I am one of the princess's guards, just as you protect King Richard."

It was rare for a woman to surprise him, but he found himself fascinated by Adriana.

Her full mouth drew his attention, and her scent reminded him of aromatic spices, like a heady mulled wine.

“Men are often distracted by a woman,” she said. “Just as you were.”

“You are a distraction,” he agreed. Her expression shifted, and he saw the wariness in her eyes. She wanted nothing from him; that much was evident. Stepping back, he asked, “What if your enemy overpowered you? Your strength would be no match for an attacker’s.”

“I rely on myself. And I protect the princess when there is need of my blade.” She squared her shoulders and removed his cloak. “Take this back. You’ll be cold.”

“It’s far colder than this in my homeland. I’m accustomed to it.” He nodded toward the aft side of the ship. “Are you wanting me to escort you back to the princess?”

“Not yet.” Lady Adriana took a deep breath. “She gave me leave to do as I please for the next hour. I’ll go back soon enough.” She donned his cloak once more, and the wind buffeted the sails, the sky turning ominous. Within minutes, the rain began to fall. The change in the weather was enough to send the count away from his pursuit. She lifted her face to the droplets, smiling wryly. “Isn’t it my ill luck to have rain during the only moments of freedom I’ve had?”

Liam ignored the rain and studied the waves. The sea water reflected the gray skies, and as they continued eastward, the waves were rising. “You should go below, a chara. The storm is going to get worse.” Already the oarsmen were fighting the winds, their arms straining to keep control of the ship.

As if in response to his warning, the vessel lurched, and Adriana went flying. Liam caught her before her head could hit the deck, and he steadied her on her feet. “Are you all right?” She nodded, but he kept her hands at her waist for balance. “You need

to go back to the princess. I wouldn't want you to be swept overboard."

Her face had gone pale, and she glanced out at the waves. "How far are we from land?"

"Don't think about that now." Aye, it was likely that if the ship capsized, they might drown. Liam was a fair enough swimmer, but it was spring, and the water would be uncomfortably cold.

Adriana removed his cloak and handed it to him. "Take me back to the princess." Liam donned the garment and walked behind her as she returned to the princess's tiny chamber.

"Stay with Her Royal Highness," Liam said. "And tell her not to be afraid." Even as he spoke the words, he knew they were unconvincing. He was struggling to remain on his feet, and when the ship tossed again, Adriana struck the wall hard.

She rubbed her shoulders, wincing at the pain. "I'll be all right," she said, before he could ask. "But promise me something."

Liam rested his hand against the wall for balance. Adriana stood only inches away, her dark hair resting over the shoulder of her crimson gown. He waited for her to speak, though his gaze was caught by her lips and soft skin. "If the ship is going to sink, I want to know. Don't let us drown."

"If the storm seizes the ship, I'll do everything I can to save you and the princess," he said.

Adriana lowered her head in a silent nod. "What is your name?"

"Liam MacEgan."

She studied him, and her expression held doubt. “You’re not like the other men I’ve seen aboard this ship.”

“Why?”

“You don’t behave as though you serve the king. You carry yourself like an equal.”

“Perhaps I am his equal,” he said in a low voice.

Though her gaze said she didn’t quite believe him, there was enough hesitancy in her expression to suggest that she knew he was not as he seemed to be.

“I’ll come for you if the storm worsens,” he promised. Lifting her gloved hand, he pressed his mouth upon it. “Guard your princess. And I’ll guard you.”

But the worry didn’t dim in her eyes. If the storm worsened, as he suspected it would, there was a very real chance that all of them would die.

Adriana paced across the small chamber while Princess Berengaria held on to a golden necklace, lost in thought. The ship heaved in the water, and the necklace went flying across the room. Both women grasped the edge of the bed, struggling to keep their balance.

“Are we going to die?” Berengaria whispered.

Adriana didn’t want to think of that, especially when she didn’t know how far they were from shore. She gripped the princess’s hand. “The king’s man said he would let us know if we were in danger. It’s just a bad storm.”

Though Adriana wanted to believe it, instinct told her otherwise. The violent sway of the vessel seemed far more than an ordinary storm.

A loud knocking resounded at the door, and her gaze snapped toward the sound. Adriana hurried to answer it, and Liam MacEgan stood at the entrance. For a moment, she faltered at his presence, for she couldn't deny her secret attraction. Liam had dark blond hair and gray eyes, and he wore a black cloak fastened with a brooch the size of her palm. But more than that, he carried himself like a king.

"My lord MacEgan?" Adriana addressed him. Though she didn't voice her fears, she already knew what he had come to warn her about. He wouldn't be here otherwise. He met her gaze with his own, and the look in his eyes terrified her.

Princess Berengaria interrupted and asked, "Are we going to sink?" The young woman's terror echoed her own.

"We're near the coast of Cyprus," Liam said. "The captain is going to divert the ship towards the coast, so that if the worst happens—"

"—we can swim to the shore," Berengaria finished.

Adriana took a deep breath, trying to steel herself for the worst. She met Liam's gaze and gave a single nod. "Thank you."

After he left, she turned back to the princess. Berengaria's eyes were filled with tears. "Adriana, I can't swim. If the ship goes down, I'm going to die."

She moved to the princess's side. "I can swim. Don't worry, I'll stay with you." Though she wasn't the strongest swimmer, it was better than nothing.

Berengaria reached for a rosary and began to pray, running her fingers over the beads. Adriana echoed the prayers in her mind, but her own fears rose up like the waves.

Then, a loud cracking noise resounded, and the ship tipped violently.

It was less than an hour before water came pouring within their chamber. If they stayed inside any longer, Adriana worried that they wouldn't get out. Her feet were soaked, and she left Berengaria with the king's sister Joan while she went in search of Liam.

He'd kept his word to tell them of the worst, and she trusted that he would tell her the truth. She saw him rowing alongside the other sailors, his arms straining against the oars as the men fought against the sea's power. Adriana took one of the ropes and wound it around her arm as she moved forward. On one side of the ship, she saw half a dozen men bailing water with buckets.

As soon as he saw her standing there, MacEgan yelled at one of the men to take his place at the oars. He fought his way toward her and gripped another rope to hold his balance.

"You need to stay below with the princess!" he yelled over the roar of the storm. "It's not safe for you here."

Adriana stumbled when the ship bucked, throwing her to the ground. Her arm wrenched from the rope, but it kept her in place. Liam pulled her back, unfastening the rope and guiding her back. His gray eyes glared at hers. "You could have been tossed overboard."

"Our chamber is filling up with water," she shot back. "And we're going to die anyway, aren't we?" Her hands were shaking, her clothing soaked from the rain and the seawater. "I'd rather take my chances with the sea."

Liam kept her in his arms, warming her shoulders. "Not if I can help it." He nodded outside. "We're only a few miles from the shore. We need to make it as close as we can. It's our best chance to survive."

“But we’re sinking right now.” She gripped his shirt, her feet frigid in the cold water. “I don’t know what the ship struck, but we don’t have time to reach land.”

He kept his hands around her waist, and she made no effort to push them away. “Listen to me.” His voice was commanding, reaching inside her to push back the fear. “If the worst happens, swim as hard as you can toward the shore. I’ll find you.”

Her hands were shaking, and she felt his arms come around her, as if to offer shelter from her fear. “I won’t let anything happen to you,” he murmured. “I swear it.”

Despite the freezing water and rain, there was a steady warmth in his embrace. Her instinct was to trust him, to let herself believe that there was a man she could rely on.

“Now go back with the princess and Queen Joan,” he insisted. “Find a place below deck to keep you from going overboard. We’ll get as close to the shore as we can.”

She held on to his forearms, as if she could take a piece of his courage with her. Then, unexpectedly, he leaned down and touched his lips to hers. “For luck,” he said.

Then he left her standing there, while he went back to the others.

The ship was going down. Liam knew it with a surety in his blood, but he’d be damned before he’d let the sea claim him. The vessel shuddered, and it was reaching the breaking point. They couldn’t bail the water out fast enough, and now it was only a matter of time before they abandoned the ship.

He let out a curse as another wave soaked the deck. A moment later, the women returned, their gowns sodden above the waist. Adriana led them forward, holding Princess Berengaria’s hand. Another woman followed behind, gripping a strand of rosary beads. He recognized her as Queen Joan of Sicily, King Richard’s sister.

“We’ll drown if we stay below,” Adriana told him. “We’re running out of time.”

Liam gathered the women together and pointed toward the shore. “We’re doing what we can to stay above water as long as we can. But if the sea takes our ship, try to make it toward land.”

Princess Berengaria’s face was white, her hands gripped together. “I can’t swim.”

Liam suppressed a curse and surveyed the others. “What of the rest of you?”

“I can,” Adriana said. Queen Joan nodded as well.

“Try to stay together,” Liam urged. To the princess, he added, “If the ship breaks apart, hold on to the largest piece of wood you can find. It will keep you afloat.”

The vessel started to tip as the lower quarters filled with water. Liam heard their shrieks and saw Adriana lunge toward one of the younger maids, who was pulled under by the force of the water. She caught the girl’s hand, struggling to hold on, but the sea fought to keep its prey.

“Adriana, no!” Berengaria cried out. And then both women disappeared beneath the water.

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Liam dove off the edge of the ship, trying to find the women, but it was too late. His lungs burned as he swam underwater, his eyes unable to see them in the darkness. He swept his arms through the water, reaching for them. His fingers touched wood, but no flesh. He dove deeper, kicking hard through the water, and suddenly, his hand gripped a length of silk.

He pulled hard, the water fighting against him to drag the woman down. And when at last he managed to bring her head above water, Adriana coughed, her body shaking. He saw that she was still holding the other woman's hand, and when he pulled the maid above water, she was lifeless, her limbs unmoving.

Liam helped bring Adriana and the maid back to the side of the ship. One of the sailors helped pull her up while another helped him bring the maid from the ocean. His efforts to revive her met with no success, and Adriana broke down in tears.

"You tried," he said, taking her in his arms. "Her life was in God's hands."

"I thought I could save her," Adriana whispered, her body trembling hard. "Before the water took her under. "

He let her cry, holding her against him. Her arms embraced him, and strangely, it brought him his own sense of calm. In her courage, he saw a piece of himself. She'd gone after the young maid with no fear, never minding that she'd nearly lost her own life in the effort.

Princess Berengaria gripped a large rope, but terror lingered in her eyes. The maid's death was a stark reminder of what could happen to any of them within moments.

Queen Joan held on to another rope but dropped to her knees, praying for the young woman's soul.

Liam gathered them together afterwards and warned, "When the ship fills up the rest of the lower chambers, it may split in half. If that happens, be ready to let go of the rope or you might be pulled under. Hold on to any piece of the deck you can find." The princess's face was white with fear, and Adriana took her place at Berengaria's side, Queen Joan at the other.

"Liam," came Adriana's voice softly. He looked into her dark eyes, and she steadied herself. "You saved my life."

"I kept my promise," he answered, "to let nothing happen to you." But even so, the sea had claimed one life. He only prayed it would be the last.

Adriana watched in horror as the ship split apart, the wood fragmenting beneath her feet. She held fast to the side of the boat, but she was plunged into the frigid water without warning. Her head went below the surface, and she tasted salt.

She struggled in the water, trying not to panic as she swam to the surface. Berengaria grabbed her, flailing in the water. Though Adriana tried to gasp for air, the princess was fighting to stay above water...and pushing her downward.

Then an arm caught her waist and forced her above the surface. She took a deep breath and saw Liam MacEgan holding her. He caught Berengaria in his other arm and brought them both away from the wreckage, guiding Adriana toward a large section of the ship. "Hold this," he ordered. Her fingers dug into the wooden surface, and she gripped it with all her strength. Then he brought Berengaria beside her, while Joan floated on a piece of wood further away.

In the darkness of night, they lost track of time. Adriana fought to swim with the

current, bringing them closer to shore. From time to time, Liam adjusted their direction, swimming alongside them. Though he ensured that each of them was safe, Adriana didn't miss the way he kept coming to her side. There was an intensity in his eyes, as though she meant something to him.

Her heart faltered, for she wasn't ready to fall in love again. Not after the last time. She rested her head against the wood, her body exhausted from the immense force of the storm. Along the edge of the sea, the sky had grown lighter, the rose of dawn painting the edge of the gray water. And after endless hours, her feet finally touched the sand.

An unexpected laugh broke forth, and she smiled at Berengaria. "Princess, we're going to live." They struggled toward the shore, their skirts weighing them down, while Liam escorted them forward.

The storm had ceased, and pieces of blue sky broke through the clouds. The waves had grown calmer, though Adriana still struggled to keep her balance in the waist-high water. Ahead, she saw the Count of Berduria, and he reached the sandy beach before any of them.

Within moments, men on horseback emerged along the shoreline, their armor gleaming in the sunlight. Liam drew close to the women. "Don't trust them," he warned. "We don't know anything about the Cypriots."

Her gratitude at being alive faded against the sudden threat of soldiers. The chill of the water seemed to sink deeper into her bones, heightening her fears. A few yards away, Queen Joan was walking out of the water toward the shore.

"Do not tell them who you are," Liam warned, but the young woman gave no indication that she'd heard him. He started to move toward the queen, but Adriana caught his arm. "Be careful, MacEgan." She didn't trust the men either, and she

didn't want to risk him being captured.

His gray eyes studied hers, and he covered her hand with his. "Wait here."

He made his way toward Joan, and Berengaria eyed Adriana. "He means something to you, doesn't he?"

Adriana didn't answer, nor did she pull her gaze away from MacEgan. "I only met him a day ago. And yet it feels like far longer."

"He is handsome," Berengaria admitted, "but not as handsome as Richard."

Adriana turned back and saw the emotion on the princess's face. They had been traveling to meet with the king for the royal wedding. But instead of becoming a bride, a worse fate might await them. Adriana felt the icy fears rise up within her, but she forced them back.

"Were it not for MacEgan, I would have drowned," Adriana whispered to the queen.

Berengaria took her hand, and they walked together towards the shore line. Although Liam was trying to bring Queen Joan closer to them, she ignored him and kept walking away.

The Count of Berduria had reached the men and was speaking to them. Although they remained mounted, Adriana tensed.

"Something's wrong," she predicted. Her hand went to the knife she kept strapped to her leg, beneath her skirt. "MacEgan was right. Stay close to me."

"Why? What's happening?" Berengaria asked.

“If you saw a shipwreck, wouldn’t you try to help the survivors?” Adriana ventured.
“These men are only watching.”

With a glance behind her, Adriana saw that three other ships had also been blown off course and were anchored less than a mile from the shore. “Should we try to reach those ships?”

“Not yet,” Berengaria answered.

Both of them watched as the count spoke to the men. His tone held arrogance, but Adriana thought she heard him speaking the Greek language. Queen Joan had already reached the shore and was preparing to join the count. The woman marched forward, her bearing filled with pride. The count pointed to her, and then to Berengaria and Adriana.

“Don’t tell them,” Adriana whispered, as if pleading for the man to remain silent.

But it was too late. To her horror, one of the armed men unsheathed his sword and plunged it into the count’s chest. The nobleman sank to his knees, falling against the sand while his life blood spilled out.

Saints deliver us . Adriana covered her mouth, shocked by what she’d just seen. Queen Joan grasped her skirts and fled back to the water. Liam called out for her to come toward them, and he reached them a moment later.

The princess was trembling with fear, and from the gleam in the soldiers’ eyes, Adriana didn’t know if they would be imprisoned or killed the moment they emerged from the water.

“The count told them who you are,” Liam said grimly. “Our best hope is that they take you hostage.”

But Adriana knew that MacEgan's life was in greater danger than her own. Already these men had killed the count, so it was clear they had no use for the men. "You need to swim hard towards the other three ships anchored off the coast," she ordered. "If you reach one of them, you can alert Richard and return for us."

"I can't leave you here alone," he argued.

The horsemen started to ride forward, and their time was running out. "You must," Adriana insisted. "If what you say is true, then they won't kill us because they'll want to use our lives to bargain with Richard. If you stay, your fate will be the same as the count's."

His face hardened, but Princess Berengaria regarded him. "Go, MacEgan. I am commanding you, as your future queen."

An unnamed expression crossed his face, and Adriana remembered that he was Irish, not English. He did not truly consider himself subject to the queen's commands. But instead, she asked gently, "Please. Go to Richard. You're our best hope to survive."

Before he could move, the soldiers charged forward with their horses. Armed men surrounded them, with spears and swords raised as a visible threat. Adriana held her breath, not knowing what to do now. The soldiers reached for MacEgan, but he made no effort to fight.

In the Norman tongue, he commanded, "Obey their orders." His eyes met Adriana's, and she saw the softer assurance within them. "I'll return to you. I swear it."

MacEgan moved so fast, the princess barely had time to get out of the way. It took only seconds for him to drag a soldier down from his horse, smashing his fist into the man's face. When a second man tried to stab him with a spear, MacEgan grasped the weapon, twisting it free of the soldier's hands. Now armed, he seized the first

soldier's horse and rode the animal hard along the shoreline, forcing the others to follow. Three men remained behind with her and Adriana, one of them seizing Queen Joan.

She held her breath as MacEgan reached the deeper water. He stood up on the horse's back and dove into the waves, disappearing from view. Adriana watched, but she couldn't see him among the wreckage. What had happened? Had he drowned? Without knowing why, hot tears broke free. She'd barely met this man, but she hated the thought of losing him.

"Don't be afraid," Berengaria whispered to her. "I believe him. He'll find a way to send a rescue."

But when they didn't see him resurface above the waves, Adriana feared the worst.

The Isle of Rhodes

April 22, 1192

"Where are they, Sir Bernard?" King Richard demanded.

The knight's face paled. "We—we don't know, Your Grace. There are twenty-five ships missing, and unfortunately, Princess Berengaria's was among them." He lowered his head in regret. "We believe the storm may have blown them off course."

"There were two hundred and nineteen ships, Bernard." Richard fought to keep his temper under control. "And you mean to tell me that not one of them saw where Berengaria's ship disappeared?"

"I'm sorry, Your Grace. But we'll send out ships to search for your bride—"

“Out,” Richard ordered, pointing towards the door. The knight fled, like the coward he was. Right now, Richard’s temper was about to break loose. Crete and Rhodes were meant to be rendezvous points, where they would stop for a few days en route to Acre. But his betrothed wife wasn’t on either island.

She might be dead, her body resting at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea. He expelled a breath, imagining Berengaria’s dark hair, her lovely eyes and form. He’d been looking forward to marrying her, understanding what sort of woman lay behind the unbridled honesty. He hardly knew her at all, but her spirit intrigued him.

Outside, the sky was clear, the sun bright and warm. The deep azure water nestled against white sand, an idyllic place to walk with a lover. He traced the emerald ring that lay upon his smallest finger. She’d given it to him in Sicily, a token that had aroused strong memories of the night he’d first taken it from her. Seeing it now only fueled his anger. He would find her, no matter how long it took. She belonged to him.

He gestured for a servant to summon one of the ships’ captains. If no one could find the women or the ships containing the treasures for his Crusade, he would stop on every island en route to Syria.

But when the captain arrived, he bowed and pleaded, “Your Grace, we have news of the princess.”

Moments later, the Irish prince, Liam MacEgan, emerged from among the men. The man looked as though he hadn’t slept in days, and bloodstains marred his face.

“They are at Cyprus, Your Grace.” MacEgan drew closer, lowering his voice so that only Richard could hear. “Soldiers took the women captive.”

“Come.” Richard wanted no other men to hear what MacEgan had to reveal. He brought the man within his chamber and ordered, “Tell me what you know.”

“The Cypriots murdered the Count of Berduria,” the Irishman explained. “Afterwards, Princess Berengaria bade me to seek help, so I swam to one of the ships nearby, and we sailed west. We found your galleys here.”

Richard’s gaze narrowed. “You left the women unguarded.”

MacEgan met his gaze with no fear. “Your bride gave me a direct order to seek help. Would you have me disobey her?”

“If her life is harmed in any way, I’ll take yours.” Richard used his height to his advantage, staring down at the Irish prince.

MacEgan didn’t back down, but chose his words carefully. “The women will be safe enough. The princess’s lady-in-waiting is as good as any trained guard. I’ve seen it myself.”

Though Richard didn’t like it, he didn’t doubt that Isaac Komnenus, the Emperor of Cyprus, would want to use Berengaria to further his own purpose. The emperor was allied with Saladin, and it was rumored that they had drunk each other’s blood, as an oath of loyalty.

The idea of his betrothed wife falling into the hands of the emperor was unthinkable. Richard stared hard at MacEgan. “Tell no one that Berengaria and my sister were taken captive.” If anyone learned that his betrothed wife was in the custody of the enemy, they would believe she’d been violated, whether or not it was true. He wanted nothing to threaten their marriage alliance.

“Let them believe that Berengaria and the queen remained on board one of the other ships. Tell them that the emperor invited them to disembark, but they refused.”

MacEgan nodded, understanding the implications. “No one will know.”

“I will send you with a group of men to attack the coast of Cyprus. Find the women, and bring them back to me alive.”

Richard returned to his place by the window, dismissing MacEgan. His gaze fixated upon the sea. If Isaac Komnenus had threatened Berengaria in any way . . . God help the man. For Richard would tear him apart.

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Limassol, Cyprus - May 1191

Nearly three weeks had passed, but there was no sign of Liam MacEgan or the king. Adriana had seen the princess's hope fading from her eyes, as they realized that they would remain prisoners of the emperor. Although Isaac Komnenus had not bound them in chains, they were locked in a chamber guarded inside and out. There was no privacy at all, and though she tried to shield the princess from the humiliation, there was little Adriana could do. The guards cast lots for the right to guard the interior of the chamber where they hoped to catch a glimpse of them.

Queen Joan never stopped complaining. From the moment they'd been taken captive, she'd made outrageous demands, for which the emperor had mocked her. When she'd insisted upon softer beds, he'd sent her a length of silk, removing the only mattress in the room. That night, they'd huddled together on a wooden floor, with nothing but the silk.

Joan had refused to humble herself, and they'd endured weeks of stale food and uncomfortable living conditions. But it was the princess who concerned Adriana the most. Berengaria had grown so thin over the weeks, her face pale while she stared for hours on end at the sea outside their barred window.

"We're not going to be rescued, are we?" she whispered. "The Crusaders who came on those ships . . . they're dead, aren't they?"

The remaining two ships had arrived only hours after their imprisonment, but the emperor had seized control of them, taking the king's treasure and murdering the men. From their window, they'd seen the bodies of the Crusaders, displayed like

bloody prizes of war.

Adriana tried to reassure the princess. “The emperor knows Richard will come. He wouldn’t bother with guarding the shore otherwise.” She crossed the small room and pointed to the hills where the Cypriots were bringing down carts filled with wood and stone. Over the next few hours, the men set out large stones, chests, doors of wood, and all manner of building materials to fortify the beach.

One of their guards stepped in front of the window, barring their view. Though he could not speak their language, his message was clear. Adriana hesitated before moving back, sending him a slight smile as she withdrew.

The distraction was enough, and she stole his curved knife, hiding it behind her back. If the Cypriots were preparing for battle, it meant that an invasion was imminent.

The door to their chamber swung open, and a young maiden appeared, trailed by two of her ladies. She gave a sharp order to the guards, and they obeyed the command, leaving the room. In heavily accented French, she said, “I have been ordered to bring the princess and the queen to my father.” Adriana remained against the wall for a moment, slipping the guard’s curved blade beneath the girdle at her waist, just behind her back. Neither Joan nor Berengaria moved forward, but while the guard was focused upon the noblewomen, Adriana donned the princess’s cloak to hide the knife.

“Why does he want to see us?” Berengaria asked, her voice calm. But Adriana knew that the soft voice hid the young woman’s fears. All of them knew that they had been kept alive only to be used as hostages . . . or worse.

The young girl shook her head. “I do not know.” She wrinkled her nose when they drew closer and added, “I will arrange for you to bathe and refresh yourselves before you are presented to him.”

Berengaria cast a worried look back at her, but Adriana nodded. The girl's offer was made in good faith. To the princess, she said, "If they intended to kill us, they would not bother with the way we look now."

"That's what I am afraid of," Berengaria said.

She closed her eyes, and Adriana went to her side. "He probably wants to prove to Richard that we are well, despite the captivity."

Berengaria reached for her hand and Adriana took it. As they followed the girl down the winding stairs, she took them into a walled garden. The warmth of the sun and the lush fragrance of jasmine flowers lifted her spirits, though she was more reassured by the weapon she'd hidden.

As the girl brought them up another set of stone stairs, Adriana drew Berengaria to a stop and pointed towards the sea. There, she spied the sails of nearly a hundred ships.

"They've found us," Berengaria breathed with thankfulness.

Adriana wondered if Liam MacEgan had alerted the king. Or whether he was still alive. The handsome Irishman had been like no other man she'd met, and the memory darkened her heart with regret. Brave and strong, he was one she'd wanted to know better.

When the young girl took them within her own chambers, she arranged for them to bathe in privacy and offered them clothing in the Cyprian style. Though Berengaria refused to wear the foreign garments, Adriana agreed to try them. The soft diaphanous fabric was like nothing she'd ever felt against her skin. She wore a cream-colored anteri tunic and soft salvar trousers. Though it was strange, not to be wearing skirts, she liked the clothing.

“You must feel like a concubine,” Berengaria teased. “I can’t imagine wearing clothes like that.”

Queen Joan stiffened, smoothing her own silk gown. “I prefer not to look like a savage.”

The princess’s mood dimmed at Joan’s words. Adriana adjusted a fold of her clothing and admitted, “It’s more comfortable than what we were wearing earlier.” But she had other reasons for wearing the new clothes. If she needed to defend the princess against an attack, the lighter trousers gave her more freedom of movement.

The girl led them from her chamber to a large, open pavilion. The sun had grown hotter, and though Adriana tried to see if any of the ships had come closer, the walls were too high to view them.

The emperor awaited them upon a throne inlaid with gold, while servants waved palm branches over his head to provide cooler air.

With the help of a servant who translated, the emperor announced, “The invaders have come for you. My men have seized the treasures that were within your ships, and your king must decide which he wants returned to him. His gold . . . or his bride.”

Berengaria’s face changed, and there was anger within it that Adriana had never seen before. The princess stood tall, and whispered in the Norman language, “Adriana, when they take us back, I want you to make your escape. Tell the king what has happened to us. Make certain he knows where we are.”

“I’m not leaving your side,” she insisted. She couldn’t rely on Joan to protect Berengaria; not when the queen might say something to offend the emperor.

“They’ll use us for bargaining. But I worry about your life.” The princess reached out

and squeezed her hand. “Forgive me, but you have no value to them. They may use you as an example.”

Though Adriana didn’t like it at all, she understood what the princess meant. No doubt Isaac Komnenus would display the queen and princess, using them as leverage to get what he wanted from Richard.

“I don’t want you to die,” Berengaria insisted. “I’m afraid for you, if you stay.”

Adriana bowed her head in acquiescence, but inwardly she knew if anyone discovered her, she would be killed. Either way, her life was in danger.

Isaac looked displeased with their private conversation, and he ordered his men to separate them. Adriana was dragged away from the princess, who gave her a nod of permission.

As the guard brought her back towards the courtyard, Adriana studied their surroundings, wondering how she could possibly break free. Her gaze settled upon some of the women who had veiled their faces.

And then she knew exactly what to do.

Just before dawn, Liam MacEgan rowed alongside the other men, bringing the smaller boats closer to the shore. The beach was covered with obstructions meant to prevent them from using war horses. It wouldn’t stop Richard, however. Already, several of the smaller boats were within distance that the horses could swim to the shore. Liam’s task was to bring the soldiers close enough to clear a path.

The archers launched a shower of arrows upon the Cypriots, and from the chaos, it was clear that they’d taken them by surprise. When they reached shallow water, Liam unsheathed his sword and charged forward with the others. His blood raced with fear

and the thrill of fighting. He'd been trained by his father and uncles since he was old enough to hold a sword, and as he faced his enemy, it soon became clear that these men were not warriors.

The farmers and merchants had been ordered by their emperor to defend the land . . . but without weapons, they were dying by the hundreds. Liam stopped attacking and moved into a defensive posture. Only if they made the first move would they taste his sword.

As they moved past the enemy, they climbed uphill toward the city. The gray morning light was starting to illuminate the ancient Roman ruins dotting the landscape. Nearer to the center lay the fortress where Liam suspected the princess and queen were being held captive. Adriana would be among them.

The image of her face remained strong within his mind with her beautiful dark eyes and slim form. She had more courage than any other woman he'd met, for she was a survivor. He'd hated leaving them here, but without King Richard knowing their whereabouts, there could be no rescue.

When they reached the fortress, it appeared to be constructed around the ruins of an old basilica. Liam ordered his men to fall back, and they retreated behind one of the stone buildings. He needed to study the defenses, to determine the best approach. Aye, they could likely make it through the front gate, but without knowing how many guardsmen were waiting, it could endanger his men unnecessarily.

He lifted his gaze to the upper segment of the fortress, for he suspected the princess and queen were being held in a fortified location. He hadn't told any of the men about the prisoners—only that they were to seek information about the emperor's defenses. Just when he had decided to lead his men along the outer walls, he heard the sound of a confrontation nearby with men shouting orders.

He gestured for two of the men to follow him while the others retreated along the left side of the fortress. Liam ran lightly, his hand resting upon his sword. Ahead, he spied a veiled woman running through the streets. Two guards pursued her, and it was clear that their speed was overtaking hers. He was torn between helping the woman and remaining focused upon their mission. But when the woman saw them, instead of fleeing, she ran straight toward them.

She didn't make it. One of the guards grasped her by the veil and jerked her backwards. When the man unsheathed a curved blade, Liam didn't stop to think, but charged forward, a roar tearing from his mouth. The guard's attention shifted just long enough for Liam to drive his own sword into the man's gut.

Shocked eyes met his, but the blade fell from his enemy's hand, and he let go of the woman. When the other guard caught up, he took one look at his fallen companion and fled.

A curse slipped from Liam's mouth. Their chances of infiltrating the fortress would be gone as soon as the man alerted the others. He sheathed his weapon and held out his hand to the woman. He couldn't have been more surprised when she suddenly threw herself into his arms.

Berengaria's heart beat so fast, she could hardly catch her breath. The emperor had ordered her and Queen Joan to be bound with silken ropes, and neither had slept last night while they'd awaited Richard's arrival. From the hundreds of ships that lined the coast, Berengaria had no doubt that the men would come soon.

The question was, what would the emperor do with them, once the king's men arrived? Though she wanted to believe that Richard cared enough about her to bargain for her life, she didn't know.

It seemed like almost a dream when she'd seen him last in Sicily. She stared out into

the blinding sun, twisting her fingers around the chain of the jeweled cross that hung hidden beneath her gown.

Hours passed, and she ignored the food and drink that were offered to her. From deep within, she reached for courage. If Adriana were there, her lady-in-waiting would offer words of encouragement, insisting that they would be rescued. Although she knew her friend had managed to escape, using the blade she'd stolen from their guard, Berengaria was afraid of what would happen if they caught her. They wouldn't hesitate to take her life, in return for the men Adriana had wounded. Berengaria closed her eyes, hoping to God the young woman was still alive.

The noise of battle rose within the air like the rumbling of thunder, and Berengaria's heart raced as the crusaders surrounded the fortress. She lost count of the dozens of armored men who poured through the gates and tried not to stare at the death and destruction that was happening all around her.

At last, she spied Richard. He was mounted on horseback, fully armed, and his chainmail glinted with gold and silver. Tall and strong, he rode forward, his sword cutting down the men who dared to oppose him. She understood now why they named him Lionheart, for not once did he flinch in battle. When he finally spied her, she couldn't stop the smile that broke forth. The look in his eyes was filled with relief, and she wanted nothing more than to race forward and fall into his arms.

But something reflected against her eyes, forcing her to look up. It was then that she saw the dozens of archers with their bows drawn . . . aimed directly at her and Joan.

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Liam kept Adriana close to his side. It hadn't taken long to find the princess and queen, given Isaac Komnenus's desire to display them. Richard had responded by bringing the full force of his army to attack Limassol, and his war ships had moved into position, surrounding the Isle of Cyprus.

Isaac was going to lose this battle, and he knew it. The only question was whether they could rescue Princess Berengaria and Queen Joan in time.

Though Liam didn't like bringing Adriana into a dangerous battle with him, neither could he leave her behind. She had a blade palmed in her hand, and she remained at his side. Unlike most women, she didn't cower at the sight of blood or death. Instead, her eyes were alert, her body poised to fight if needed.

He'd never met another woman like her. She fascinated him, and when this was over, he intended to pursue her openly.

When they reached the center of the fortress, Adriana moved as close as she could to Berengaria and Joan without drawing notice. Both women stood upon the dais, but Adriana managed to find a place upon the stairs behind several of the guards. Liam remained nearby, but he still had a clear view of the emperor.

He suspected that Isaac Komnenus hadn't known how vast Richard's forces were. It had taken only a matter of hours to take Limassol, and now the man's life lay in the king's hands.

With the help of a translator, the emperor came forward to speak with Richard. "An invasion was not necessary. We could have negotiated a truce between us."

Liam saw the king's mouth twitch, as if Richard were struggling to hold back his temper. "And why would I seek to negotiate with a man who seized my betrothed wife and my sister, stole our treasures, and murdered my soldiers?" He gestured for two dozen of his men to come forward, surrounding the king.

"If I signal my archers, your women will die," the emperor responded.

"If you harm them, so shall your daughter die." Richard nodded towards the back of the fortress where several soldiers held a young girl captive. She was sobbing with fear, knowing that her life lay in the soldiers' hands.

The emperor's face reddened with fury. And then, when he gave a signal, Liam glanced up to see the archers poised.

"Adriana!" he warned, just as she tore the shield free of his arm. He watched in horror as she leaped onto the dais and threw herself in front of the princess and queen. Half a dozen arrows embedded within the wooden shield, and Liam followed her lead, seizing another shield to protect Berengaria and Joan.

God above, she could have been killed. Adriana hadn't hesitated to offer her life for the princess's, and Liam hadn't known how it would feel to see her in such danger. The need to guard her went beyond anything he'd ever felt, and he stood beside her with his own shield, prepared to defend her. Both of them held their shields and weapons steady, guarding the women.

All around them, Richard's men charged forward while Liam held his position beside Adriana with his sword drawn. Though he could see the fear on her face, she never lowered her shield from the women. Her bravery was undeniable, and nothing would make him leave her side.

Arrows shot through the sky, taking down the emperor's archers while steel clashed against steel. One man dared to come too close, and Liam struck him down as the

man aimed his blade. Another tried to attack Adriana, but Liam seized a spear and ended the man's life, just as Adriana's dagger pierced him.

"Sorry," he muttered. "But I wasn't going to take a chance with your life."

Her expression held gratitude as she gave him a nod. It took only a few more moments for the king to gain the upper hand as the emperor's men fled in defeat. Soldiers surrounded Isaac Komnenus, their weapons drawn. The emperor's daughter remained a hostage, but to Richard's credit, he had not harmed her.

At last, the fighting ceased within the fortress, and Richard held possession of Cyprus. The king walked closer, and Liam lowered his voice. "Don't move," he murmured to Adriana. "This isn't over yet."

She ventured an unsteady smile. "I'll be glad when it is."

"Your Grace," the emperor begged, "I wish there to be peace between us. As compensation for your losses, I will offer twenty thousand gold marks. In addition, I offer my only daughter as your hostage, and I will join my men with yours to fight on Crusade."

Soldiers gripped Isaac's arms, and Richard moved in, towering above the man. "We will discuss the terms later."

"Not in irons, Your Grace. I beg of you, do not place me in irons."

A strange smile came over the king's face when he unsheathed a dagger at his waist, slashing through the silken bonds of Berengaria and Joan. "As you will," he agreed. And when the emperor had been taken into custody, Richard flashed a smile to his knights. "Have his chains made of silver."

The king moved forward to free his bride, and Liam drew back with Adriana. Her

body relaxed against him, and he held her close. The warmth of Adriana, the softness of her hair against his cheek felt right. And when she touched her fingertips to her own lips, he wondered if her thoughts mirrored his own.

The next day, Adriana helped the princess bathe, dressing her in a gown of blue silk embroidered in silver. She parted Berengaria's hair in the center and pinned a transparent veil of the same length, covering it in the style of a mantilla. Upon her head rested a diadem with several bands of jewels and fleurs de lis with enough foliage to resemble a double crown. At her throat, she'd chosen to wear the ruby-encrusted cross that Richard had given. And as a gift to her future husband, she'd given him a gold belt inlaid with jewels.

"You look beautiful," Adriana pronounced, stepping back to arrange Berengaria's train. Soon, it was time for her to join the king.

Richard wore a satin rose tunic bound by the golden belt the princess had given him, while a striped silver tissue mantle rested about his shoulders. A silver sheath encased his sword of Damascus steel with a golden hilt, and upon his head he wore a scarlet bonnet, brocaded in gold, with figures of animals. As he dismounted, he walked forward with a truncheon in one hand to show his power over the Cypriots.

The warm air held the deep scent of jasmine from the vines growing up the stone walls. Adriana could not imagine a more beautiful place to be married. As they took their vows, she caught a glimpse of Liam watching her. His dark blond hair gleamed in the sunlight, and his gray eyes held the promise of more between them.

The cheers of the men resonated throughout the old fortress, but Adriana was spellbound by the man who had rescued her from harm. The wedding celebration began, and when Liam held out his hand, she went to him.

After hours of celebrating, the moon hung bright in the sky. Adriana walked barefoot, with Liam's hand in hers. She carried her shoes in her other hand, reveling in the

intimate feel of the silken sand against her soles.

They walked in silence for long moments, until Liam led her up the side of a hill. In the distance, he pointed to a large rock rising from the sea.

“A legend says that the goddess Aphrodite rose from the sea, near that stone.”

“The goddess of love,” she murmured quietly, sitting back against the grasses.

Liam joined her, and the look in his eyes made her shiver. “She wouldn’t compare to you.” His hand moved up to push a lock of her hair aside, and Adriana felt her blood rising like the tide of the sea.

He laid her back against the grass, his hands resting against her wrists. “The first night I saw you, I wanted to kiss you. You’re like no woman I’ve ever known before.”

She felt the same about this man and couldn’t deny that she wanted him. “Show me,” she whispered. With her back upon the ground and the stars above them, she grew restless with her own yearning.

When Liam kissed her, the first touch of his mouth was like a fire she’d never before tasted. His hungry lips plundered hers until she could no longer catch her breath. With his tongue, he tasted the softness of her mouth, inviting her to open for him. And when he invaded the softness of her mouth, her body responded with need.

His hands moved over her shoulders, down to her waist, and when his body moved atop hers, she felt the length of his desire.

“Who are you, Liam MacEgan?” she murmured against his mouth. “You’re like no one I’ve met before.”

“A man who desires you more than anything in this world.” He rolled to his side, and her legs twined with his. She didn’t care that this was improper, for there was no one to see. Liam had filled up the loneliness inside her, offering a hope she’d never expected.

She lifted her arms around his neck, holding him close. “When we reach the Holy Land, you’ll be gone from me.”

“I’ll fight for a time,” he admitted, “but I’ll not let you go. Not if you want me to stay.” He bent and took her mouth again, coaxing her to cast aside her inhibitions.

Although his kiss stole her senses, she pulled back. “You’ll go back to Ireland, when this is over,” she murmured, “and I’ll remain with Queen Berengaria.” She didn’t like to think of it, though she knew there was no other choice.

“If it is your will, I can take you with me, back to my homeland.” He rested his cheek against hers, pulling her into a tight embrace. The confidence in his voice, the assurance that the king and queen would follow his own wishes, struck her as impossible.

But then, Liam MacEgan had never behaved like the king’s servant. And the more she thought of it, Richard had never treated him as such.

“You’re not a merchant or a serf, are you?” she ventured. “You’re more than a warrior.”

“Does it matter who I am?”

“I wouldn’t care if you were a beggar,” she admitted. “I would take you for the man you are.”

“And what if I were a prince?” He raised up, touching her shoulder as his gray eyes

stared into hers. “Would that bother you?”

In his face, she saw a sudden tension. It was true, she realized. This man was not a commoner, but a man of royalty . . . just as Richard was.

“It would only bother me if you left me behind,” she said softly. “I want to know the man you are.”

He sat up and brought her into his lap, holding her close to stare out at the sea. “My father is King of Laochre, a small kingdom within Ireland. Not a High King,” he admitted. “But I have responsibilities to our people. I came seeking an adventure.” He brushed a kiss against her temple. “But instead, I found you.”

She laughed softly. “If the past few weeks are any evidence, every day with you will be an adventure.” Though it intimidated her to realize that this man was the son of a king, she wouldn’t have cared if he were a beggar. Liam MacEgan had captured her heart as surely as he’d defended their queen.

“I’ll keep you safe,” he offered. “I give you my solemn promise.”

The words felt like a wedding vow, and Adriana lifted her mouth to his, giving him the answer hidden inside her. And when Liam enfolded her in his arms, she could imagine nothing but a future with him . . . the prince of her heart.