

# **SWEET REVENGE by Lynsay Sands**

## **Excerpt**

“Kyla was the first to see them.

Lying on her stomach in the back of the cart, she was dozing in and out of a fitful sleep when a leaf fluttered onto her forehead. Frowning slightly, she reached out from beneath the furs covering her and brushed the item away. She then tried to settle back into the warm cocoon of healing sleep again, but found discomfort would not allow it.

Forcing her eyes open and blinking as the furs she lay upon came hazily into view, she shifted slightly, trying to find a position that would ease the awakening pain in her back. It was a mounting, burning pain and was a miserable way to start the day, she decided unhappily, her mind immediately turning to thoughts of Morag's miracle salve. The stuff smelled as putrid as a privy on a hot summer day, but it made the pain in her back disappear immediately it was applied. Temporarily at least. The effects lasted for only a few hours, then the foul balm had to be reapplied to beat back the white hot agony it treated. She could do with some of it's lovely numbing effect now, she thought on a sigh and shifted carefully onto her side to peer hopefully at the woman who slept beside her.

A drop of what she thought to be rain landed on her face as the fur slid aside and she wiped it away, surprise replacing her irritation as she felt the grit on her finger and looked down to see that it wasn't rain but a small bead of mud. Eyes raising instinctively, she gaped at the shapes that hovered in the branches overhead. Silent and still, they hid among the trees, watching tensely as the procession moved along beneath them.

Kyla had just opened her mouth to shout a warning to her escort, when a long, loud wail filled the air. Blood curdling and ferocious, it immediately set the hair at the nape of her neck on end. When the first voice was joined by what seemed like a hundred others, it sent a shudder down the back of every listener present and brought the mounted party to an abrupt halt.

Grabbing for the side of the cart to steady herself, Kyla watched in amazement as a man dropped lithely from the branches above, to land between she and Morag in the cart. Her eyes widened as a ray of sunlight speared through the trees, turning his red hair to fire and glinting off of the sword he held. Then her gaze dropped over the plaid he wore and was arrested. At this angle and with it flapping in the early afternoon breeze as it was, she had an exceptional view of his naked legs all the way up to his thighs. And a fair pair of legs they were too, she noted with an interest wholly inappropriate to the situation. Shapely ankles, muscled calves, nice knees, and strong thighs held her attention until he let loose another long, loud wail that drew her eyes upward as he raised his sword high in one hand.

Truly, had she not seen him, she would have thought his wailing the shriek of the dead rising up from the pits of hell. It was loud, and long, and ear piercing, and seemed to stab right through her

skull to her brain, making that throb in contest with her back. It didn't help when his voice was joined by the others still in the trees. Then they suddenly began dropping from the trees as well, and bedlam broke out in the clearing. Startled warning shouts and bellows of pain rose up around Kyla like the flood waters in the river by her home in spring and the fellow standing at her feet suddenly leapt off the wagon and out of sight.

Gritting her teeth, she closed her eyes briefly, then pushed herself to her hands and knees. Her arms shook weakly from that small effort and the bottom of the cart seemed to swim before her eyes, but she took a deep breath and managed to ease back to sit on her haunches. Raising her head determinedly then, Kyla peered around as the clang of metal against metal joined the shouts and shrieks already filling the quiet glade they had been passing through.

The miserable burning in her back and her pounding head were immediately forgotten as Kyla took in the activity around her. They were under attack of course, but then she had already known that. What made her mouth drop open and her eyes widen incredulously was the unbelievable fact that the mad savages attacking her chain mailed escort actually appeared to be winning!

Several members of her escort were already fallen from their mounts. The rest were attempting to urge their horses closer to the wagon to form a tight circle around it to defend from, but their attempts were hampered by the panicked rearing of the already unmanned horses that now seemed to be everywhere.

Swallowing the fear tightening her throat, Kyla peered slowly over the glade with a sort of stunned apprehension. Her men were dropping like flies at summer's end. Already a third of them lay injured or dying on the muddy ground.

A roar drew her eyes as a great, mountain of a man slammed into the back of the cart with one of her men-at-arms. With no time to prepare herself for the jolt, Kyla was sent sprawling onto her stomach again in the bottom of the wagon, her chin slamming hard onto the floor of the cart despite the cushioning furs.

Cursing, she started to push herself back to her haunches again, but had barely lifted her head when one of her escort rode up to the side of the cart, forcefully shoving her down again and ordering her to be still before riding off into the fray once more.

Frowning and muttering under her breath, Kyla did as she was told...For all of a heartbeat, then popped back up into a sitting position again.

“What's about?”

Reminded of the woman who had been resting beside her throughout this trip, Kyla tore her gaze reluctantly away from the fray and sank slowly back into the wagon. Rolling carefully onto her side, she peered worriedly over the wrinkled old face of the woman who had been a maid, nurse, and mother figure to her for as long as she could recall, then lied, “’Tis all right. ’Tis nothing.”

A bloom of pale color tinged wrinkled old cheeks with anger and Morag's black eyes narrowed. “Yer lying, girl. Ye never could fool me.”

The maid began to rise, determined to see for herself and Kyla quickly pressed her back down. "Nay, do not rise."

"Then tell me!" she ordered sharply. "And the truth this time."

"Aye." Kyla sighed, searching briefly for a soft way to say it, then shrugged. There was none. "We are under attack."

"What?!" Gasping in horror, Morag began to struggle upward again.

Kyla was trying to push the woman back down below the safety of the sides of the cart when a second jolt gave pause to them both. Stilling, they turned to stare at the man now standing on the back of the wagon. It was the same man who had first landed in the cart and as she had before, Kyla found herself mesmerized by the sight of him as he surveyed the activity around them. Tall. Strong. Magnificent. He stood poised for a moment, his side to them, the sweat on his body shining in the sunlight, then, just as suddenly as he had arrived, he lunged off the cart again, sword swinging as he tackled a passing man-at-arms.

"Gor!" Fanning herself with her good hand, Morag collapsed back against the skins in the bottom of the cart. "Savages!" she muttered crossly. "Highlanders. 'Tis one of them yer Catriona is wedding ye too. Yer dear departed mother must be rolling in her grave."

"Aye," Kyla agreed, then scowled as Morag pushed herself back up to a sitting position again so that she could peer over the side of the cart.

"What are you doing?" Kyla hissed, sitting up to pull her back.

"Watching to see if we win."

Kyla opened her mouth to say that it mattered little, even if Catriona's men won, she would not be the winner, but before she could comment on that however, two battling Scots crashed into the side of the wagon, giving it another jolt. It sent both women tumbling sideways against the far wall. Just as Morag would have raised herself again to continue her watch, a sword swung over their heads, then caught in the wood of the wagon as a man cried out in agony.

The Scot who had landed briefly in the wagon earlier peered over the side at them, a fierce glare on his face for their benefit. "Keep yer heads down, ye lack-witted harpies!" he bellowed in Gaelic.

When Kyla's eyes widened in confusion, the man then repeated the order in English, though a little more politely. Obviously he had thought she had not understood the order the first time, but in truth, her confusion was due to the fact that he had given it at all. He was not one of her escort, but one of their attackers. What the devil did he care if she lived or got herself killed?

Frowning, she peeked over the edge of the wagon again, her shock deepening as she saw that every single one of her mail armored escort were fallen. Not one still stood among the battling men. Even the driver of the wagon was sprawled on the seat, a shoulder wound bleeding badly. The only warriors still standing in defense of them were the Scots her betrothed had sent to meet them at the border and there seemed few of them left.

Peering at the various small skirmishes still going on, she estimated that perhaps fifteen of her escort still stood against the attackers. Fourteen, she corrected as another man fell. Thirteen. Twelve.

“What's about?” Morag rasped anxiously and Kyla bit her lip as she glanced at her again. Once the last of their defenders were slain, the attackers would no doubt turn their attention to them. Kyla was not even willing to contemplate what would happen then. These savages bore no resemblance to the courtly knights she was use to.

Muttering under her breath, she ignored Morag's question as well as her own aches and pains and began to move. Climbing over the lip of the cart, she crawled onto the seat beside the slumped driver and grabbed the reigns from his slack hands, then gave them a sharp snap. Panicked by the smell of blood and the battle that raged around them, both animals were more than happy to fulfill her silent order. After a brief spate of snorting and wild rearing, the beasts set out, hooves tearing into the moist earth beneath them as they drew the cart quickly away from the fighting.

Movement to her side brought Kyla's eyes around in time to see the previous driver tumble from the bench seat, dislodged by the lurching motion of the wagon. She winced at the thud as he hit the ground, but set her teeth and snapped the reigns over the horses again, urging them to gain more speed.

“Damnation!” Pushing herself up weakly, Morag peered out the back of the cart at the men who seemed not even to notice their prize escaping.

Glancing back, Kyla scowled and reached back to push her gently down onto the floor of the cart. “Stay down, Morag. You are not well.”

The woman snorted at that, but sank back among the furs willingly enough, though not before muttering, “Oh aye, but ye are I suppose?”

Disregarding the sarcastic comment, Kyla concentrated on negotiating the trees they had entered. They hadn't gone far when she spotted the horses. About twenty of them was her guess. No doubt belonging to their attackers. She was just worrying over the idea that they may have left someone to mind the animals when Morag's ear splitting scream rent the air from the back of the cart. Kyla turned just in time to see a figure drop from a tree branch .

He was a huge man. A veritable mountain that made the whole wagon shudder as he landed in the back of it. Kyla's gaze found the shiny blade he held in one hand and she simply panicked. With a broken arm and cracked ribs, her nurse maid was helpless against such a brute.

Dropping the reigns, she stood, turned, drew her own dirk from her waist, and lunged all at once. It was really quite amazing that she hit her target. But not only did she hit him, she sent the attacker backward right off the cart.

It had been an incredibly stupid thing to do. Kyla realized that at once. With nothing to hold on to but the person she was tackling, she went tumbling off the wagon with the man. Now driverless, the cart continued on it's merry way, Morag screeching frantically from the back.

The savage's body cushioned Kyla from the worst of the fall. Despite this bit of luck, her landing was jarring and, for a moment, she could only lie atop the man, trying to regain her breath. It was the shine of sunlight reaching delicately through the summer leaves overhead to touch the tip of the blade she had dropped that moved her to action. She had just managed to grasp the dirk when the

brawny man she lay on suddenly released a loud roar and rolled her onto her back, a move that sent all of the air rushing out of her lungs.

Gasping in agony, Kyla blindly jabbed her knife at him. Much to her relief, the great bear cursed and moved off her at once. Taking advantage of that, Kyla rolled quickly away from him, and onto her stomach, sighing as the pain that had been ripping at her immediately eased a bit. Still, her vision wavered slightly as she eyed him where he now sat, gaping at her with amazement as he grasped the seeping wound she had made in his side. It really wasn't much of a wound from what she could see, which meant once he got over his surprise at her aggressive action, he would no doubt come at her again.

Turning her head, Kyla peered about, her gaze fastening on a good sized fallen branch a few inches away from her right hand. It was leafless, and a pale brown from time spent in the elements. The end nearest her was obviously the tip, but it widened out as it went, until the end that would have grown out of the tree itself was thicker around than her upper arm. Stretching, she closed her fingers over it, dragging it toward her even as she began to struggle to her hands and knees. Then, grasping it in both hands, she used it to help lever herself back to her feet.

The man recognized her intent the moment she lifted the stump of wood in her trembling arms and turned toward him. He immediately started to rise, but Kyla was already swinging for his head. The wood connected with a crack, the dead branch snapping in half as it slammed into his head, and for a moment, Kyla feared all she had managed to do was anger the man further, then, a gurgle of surprise slipped from his lips and he sank back to lie in the leaves and grass.

Kyla felt nausea rise up inside her, then Morag's screams reached her through her dismay. Turning away from him, she hurried after the fleeing cart, her heart near stopping when another figure dropped from the trees directly in front of the wagon. Spooked, the horses reared, the cart tipped, and Morag tumbled out with a cry that turned Kyla's blood cold as the cart righted itself and the horses stomped fearfully at the ground.

All she could see was Morag's frail body lying on the ground as she rushed forward. Forgetting the other man, she rushed to the maid's side, the knife slipping from her limp fingers as she dropped to her knees and gently touched one leathery cheek. "Morag? Morag!"

The flickering of those old, white eyelashes seemed the most beautiful thing in the world to Kyla just then. Releasing a gasping sob, she hugged the frail body close and silently offered up a prayer of thanks.

It was only then that she recalled the other barbarian. Glancing up, she saw with some surprise that he was a mere boy. And that he wasn't paying her the least bit of attention. He was looking past her.

Following his gaze, she immediately understood his lack of concern. The battle was over. The warriors were approaching, expressions grim.

Laying Morag quickly back down, Kyla snatched up the dirk she had dropped and got to her feet, moving instinctively between the prone woman and the approaching men. But, like the boy, the

warriors paid her little heed. Instead, they stopped by their fallen comrade and circled him, hiding him from view.

Clenching the dirk tighter in her sweaty hand, Kyla set her gaze darting about the area. It seemed obvious there was no escape, for she could not leave without Morag. Standing and fighting was her only option. In truth she wished it were not. She had never thought to die this way. Nor so young.

The men began to turn their attention to her now. Expressions forbidding, they moved forward, forming a half circle in front of her as they took in her stance and the dirk in her hand.

Kyla was expecting an immediate attack, men coming at her from all sides. It was a bit unnerving when they merely continued to stare at her, then began to discuss her in Gaelic, unaware that she understood the language.

“Bonnie,” one commented, bringing her wary gaze to him. He was tall. Good God they were all tall. She was of average height herself and these men seemed giants at that moment. Though that impression could have been due to the situation itself rather than their actual size. For truthfully, while not one of them was less than six feet tall, there were many men who served her brother who reached that height. Her brother himself stood over six feet. Still, these men were like a forest of trees before her. Broad-chested, solid, strong, and terrifying.

“Aye. Bonnie. But wee.” The man who said that seemed to be the leader. At least she had noticed that the others had deferred to him as he lead the way to stand before her. He was the red-haired man, the same one who had stood on the back of the wagon, then called her a harpy and ordered her to keep her head down. He was one of the tallest of them. He also seemed to be one of the brawniest, though the man directly beside him, the one who had originally called her 'bonnie' was a good deal larger. Good grief, that man could be mistaken for a small building from a distance, she thought, frowning briefly at him before turning her attention back to the leader as she realized that the men were agreeing with him and not very flatteringly.

“Aye. Puny.”

“Pewlin'.”

“All bones.”

“Frail lookin'.”

“Pale as death too and swaying on her feet. I be thinking she won't survive the trip home let alone last the winter.”

The leader nodded at that observation and they all eyed her gloomily now. Then a dark-haired man behind the leader brightened. “Mayhap 'tis not her. Mayhap we attacked the wrong party.”

Those words brought a round of hopeful looks from the other men, but the leader shook his head. “Nay, Duncan. 'Twas the MacGregor's we fought with the Sassenach. I recognized at least two of them.”

Kyla's sigh of disappointment joined that of the mens'. For a moment she had glimpsed freedom. For surely if they had erred, they would have let her go? Alive? But, aye, 'twas the MacGregors that had been escorting their party. Twenty of them had met them at the border. It had

been an added precaution, though Kyla had thought it unnecessary at the time, since forty of Catriona's men had already been escorting her. Now she saw how wrong she had been, for the English men-at-arms had been much slower and awkward in their mael. They had fallen quickly against these savages, leaving the MacGregor men alone to protect her. She supposed she was who these men were looking for, though she could not for the life of her figure out why. Unless the entire betrothal had been a ruse to get her away from the castle and simply assassinate her. That was a possibility. And not beyond Catriona's nefarious mind.

"Well, we'd best be collecting her and moving on," the leader commented finally, drawing her wary attention back from her thoughts. He did not seem eager to accomplish the deed. In fact the only move he made was to shift his feet as he eyed her. Still, even that was enough to make Kyla stiffen warily. She would not go down without a fight.

"Careful of that blade of hers. 'Tis verra sharp. She gave me a fair nasty scratch with it."

Her gaze turned at once to the speaker, the man she had noted could be mistaken for a building. Shock covered her face now as she took in his face rather than his bulk and recognized him as the one she had stabbed, then knocked out. The man was standing tall and strong, no discomfort on his face and little to show that she had hurt him except for the blood on his shirt and the bruising that was starting on his forehead, she noted now with disgust. It must have been shock alone that had set him back for a short time.

Mouth tightening, Kyla braced her feet further apart and bent her knees slightly in a manner she had seen her brother take during hand to hand combat.

Tipping his head to the side, the leader eyed her briefly, then suggested in English, "Ye'd best be dropping the blade, lassie, ere ye hurt yerself."

Kyla's only response was to lift her chin grimly. When the leader moved calmly forward, she was ready for him. Or so she thought.

He took two steps in a slow, meandering pace, then suddenly lunged. Grabbing her wrist in one hand, he forced it into the air, snatched the knife from her fingers with embarrassing ease, then tossed it to the man she had stabbed.

Screaming in frustration, Kyla kicked at his legs, and screeched furiously as she found herself picked up and slung over his shoulder like a sack of wheat.

"Calm yerself!" The stern order was accompanied by a slap on the behind that shocked her into silence. "We'll not hurt ye or the old witch."

Cursing roundly, Kyla thumped her fists ineffectively against his wide back, then paused to watch anxiously as one of the other men stooped to survey Morag. She nearly sobbed with relief when the fellow seemed to realize the woman's fragile condition and took care to lift her gently before following the man carrying herself.

When the barbarian transporting her suddenly paused, Kyla knew instinctively that they had reached the wagon and that he would most likely drop her in to it. She tried to brace herself for what was to come, but no amount of preparation on earth could have readied her for her landing in

the back of that cart. "Twas not that he was unduly rough. Simply that he knew not of her injury and set her flat on her back in the bottom of the wagon with a small bump. It had the same effect as if she had been dropped on a wide board with nails poking out of it. The pain took her breath away, leaving not even a small gasp for her to cry out with as lights danced briefly before her eyes before going out."