



No Longer a Gentleman

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Excerpt of *No Longer a Gentleman*

Cassie Fox, half-English and half French, has dedicated her life to battling Napoleon's empire through her work as a British spy. Her current assignment is to discover if Lord Wyndham, missing and presumed dead in France for ten years, might still be alive. Cassie investigates the castle where Wyndham might be imprisoned, and is presented with an opportunity to enter the dungeon and perhaps rescue the long lost lord.

After releasing the hold, Cassie efficiently bound the guard's wrists and ankles and gagged him. Another moment to stow him behind the desk so he wouldn't be

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immediately visible if anyone entered, then she snatched up the key ring. If Gaspard was going to be back soon, she needed to move fast.

It took a few moments to find the right key. The door swung open, and she was almost flattened by the stench in the passage on the other side. Dear God, what was it like to go ten years without a bath?

Hoping she'd quickly become inured to the thick scent of unwashed bodies, she headed down the ill-lit passage. Her nose confirmed that the occupied cells were on the left at the end. Which one held the man she sought?

As she paused, she heard the sound of a male voice behind the last door. She blinked. He was *singing!* He had a fine baritone.

She listened to the words, and smiled involuntarily when she realized that he was singing a French song so scurrilous that even she didn't know all the obscenities. Probably not the priest, then.

Now to find out if it was Wyndham. Hoping to God he hadn't been driven mad, she found a likely key and attempted to open the cell on the far end. It took three attempts to find the right key. She opened the door, and found herself face to face with a monster from nightmare with filthy hair and beard falling over ragged garments.

They both froze in shock, staring at each other. Was this Kirkland's golden boy? The prisoner was broad shouldered and gaunt as a staving wolf. Hard to tell what color his hair was under the filth. Not really dark, but certainly not blond. His only distinctive feature was startlingly intense dark-ringed gray eyes.

The moment of surprise ended—and he launched himself at her with murder in his crazed gray eyes.

* * *

In a world of endless monotony, even small changes were instantly noticeable. Grey was running in place when a key in the lock brought him instantly alert. The door hadn't been opened since the time he'd come close to killing Durand. Even since, Durand had spoken through the window when he came to taunt Grey with stories of great French victories and predictions of the imminent defeat of the British.

But if Durand or Gaspard were visiting, they would know what key to use. A guard? No one else was allowed down here. Grey approached the door, every muscle in his body taut. If there was even the remotest chance he could escape, he'd attack.

The door swung open to reveal a woman. The shock temporarily paralyzed him. Dear God, a woman, the first he'd seen in ten years! She was old and drab and forgettable, but unquestionably female. The sheer wonder of that held him immobile.

He recovered from his surprise when he realized this was his chance to escape this damnable cell. She'd never be able to stop him, especially since she didn't even hold a weapon. He charged at her, planning to snatch the keys and knock her aside.

He was grabbing for the keys when she tripped him, caught his outstretched arm, and used his own speed to sling him to the floor with his arm twisted behind his back to a point just short of excruciating pain. He lay on his belly, stunned. Years of exercise and an old woman could lay him out?

"Are you Lord Wyndham?" she asked in a swift, low voice. "I come from Kirkland to help you."

She spoke in English. It was so long since he's heard the language that it took him several moments to interpret the words.

She said in French, “So you’re not Wyndham. No matter, if you want to get out of here, I’ll help you if you promise not to attack me again.”

He replied in the same language, “I am Wyndham, but I’ve not spoken English in years. I wasn’t attacking you, just trying to escape. Will you let me up?”

She released his arm. He scrambled to his feet, feasting his eyes on the sight of another human being. Better yet, a clean, normal woman. He impulsively crushed her into an embrace, his heart pounding.

She gasped and started to push him away. “Please,” he said, his voice shaking. “I’ve been so hungry for touch. Only a moment. *Please!*”

She relaxed and let him hold her. Dear God, she felt good! A warm, breathing woman with a sweet old lady scent of lavender that made him think of his grandmother. He never wanted to let her go.

After too short a time, she stepped away. “Enough,” she said, her voice compassionate. “We must leave. Almost everyone in the castle is ill with influenza, so I think we can walk right out if we’re careful. I have a pony cart where you can hide till we’re away. Do you have anything to take with you?”

He gave a bitter laugh. “Not a single damned thing, except for Père Laurent in the next cell.” He took the keys from her and began fumbling through them.

“Try this.” She touched a key. “It’s similar to the one that opened your cell. Can the priest move quickly?”

“He’s been ill. I don’t know how much longer he’ll last in this beastly place.”

The woman frowned. “That could jeopardize our escape.”

“I’m not leaving without him,” Grey said flatly as he slid the key into the lock..

“Very well, then.”

The woman might be old and drab, but she knew when not to waste time arguing. Grey’s hands were shaking as he tried to unlock the door. Such a simple action, yet deeply unreal after ten years when he had done nothing so simple and normal. But the cold iron key was solid in his hand, and that throw to the floor had been very real.

“Who are you?” he asked as he jiggled the key in the stiff lock.

She shrugged. “I have had many names. Call me Cassie or Reynard.”

Cassie the Fox. Given that she’d managed to enter the castle and release him, it was a good name for her.

The door swung open and Grey finally met the man who knew him better than anyone else in the world. Laurent was lying on his pallet. On the stone above his head there was a brown, irregular cross that must have been drawn on the wall in blood. The priest’s personal shrine.

Père Laurent pushed himself up on one arm as the door opened. He was thin, white-haired, and almost as ragged as Grey, but Grey would have known him anywhere by the calm wisdom in his face.

“Grey.” The priest smiled luminously as he stretched out a hand. “At last we meet in person.”

“Meet and escape, courtesy of this lady here.” Grey took his friend’s hand and pulled him to his feet. “We must move quickly. Can you manage?”

The priest swayed and would have fallen without Grey’s support. He exhaled raggedly. “I fear not. You must go without me. Better you escape than all of us be captured.”

“No!” Grey slid his arm around Laurent’s waist. The older man was just skin and bones, seeming so fragile that he might break, but once again, human touch was a pleasure deeper than words could describe. “I leave with you or not at all.”

Cassie frowned. “Père Laurent is right. We must escape from the castle, avoid pursuit across France, and travel back to England. The good father doesn’t look as if he can climb the stairs.”

“I’ll carry him!” Grey spat out.

“He is very stubborn,” the priest said mildly to Cassie. “But if we can get away from the castle, I can be left safely with a niece while you two run for your lives.”

“Very well.” Her eyes were worried. “But we must move quickly. Sergeant Gaspard could return at any moment.”

As Père Laurent reached out and touched the blood cross in a gesture of farewell, Grey hissed under his breath, “I hope the devil does return!”

Luckily Cassie the Fox didn’t hear him.