

The General's Discipline

By

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Chapter One

1626 Surrey England...

The masked figure, dressed in black and concealed by the dark shadows, silently crouched in a recess five feet above the floor at the back of the chapel, waiting for the right moment to make a move. With senses attuned to every movement below, the intelligent eyes behind the mask watched the thief avidly as he skulked around, helping himself to the treasures he beheld.

Suddenly, the moment arrived. Leaping down from the alcove in one smooth jump, the figure brandished a sword at the unsuspecting thief.

The blaggard reeled backwards, a dry scream trapped in his throat. He recoiled even further on wobbly knees as the shadowy figure loomed before him, the tip of the sword menacingly close to his heart.

"On guard, mon ami!" the figure growled at him.

The thief shook with fear and made an attempt at bravado. He raised his chin and, fumbling nervously, withdrew his own sword, dropping his ill-gotten gains in the process. He parried the attack, but the masked figure was a better swordsman than he, nimble of foot and a strong arm to match.

The thief lunged forward again and again, trying his best to outwit his attacker, but he lacked his opponent's cunning and expertise.

"Surrender!" the masked figure demanded, gaining the upper hand and pressing the thief backwards as he tried to avoid the sharp, pointed blade.

"Never!" the thief spat angrily. He knew he was losing, and looking back over his shoulder, he tried to back away towards the door, deciding that running was his best course of action.

But luck wasn't on his side. He suddenly found his opponent's thin metal blade at his throat. He snapped his head back and froze, his eyes glittering with suppressed rage.

The voice beneath the mask sneered huskily, "Drop your weapon!"

When he didn't immediately comply, the sword nicked his skin, drawing a droplet of blood. He quickly did as he was bid. His sword clattered to the floor, and the masked figure kicked it aside before hissing, "I will spare your life this time, but for thieving, you will be imprisoned! *Guards!*"

A mere few seconds later, four burly guards rushed into the chapel from a side door and taking one look at the scene before them, took control.

Two of the guards grabbed the thief and manhandled him out of the small chapel. As he was led away, he cursed loudly. His opponent gave him a mocking bow before claspng the sword between both hands and leaning on it nonchalantly until he was out of sight.

When he'd gone, the figure threw the sword up in the air, catching it mid-flight and making sounds of delight!

"Ha! I got him, did I not?"

The two remaining guards, Angus and Liam, looked at each other and rolled their eyes. Liam stepped forward, his eyes glittering angrily. "Aye, Mistress Anne. But you should be more careful, you cannot handle these things on your own!" he admonished her.

Anne Knightley of Falsworth Hall removed her mask and feathered hat, grinning impishly. She shook her hair out, revealing long, lustrous locks of blonde hair.

"Ah, but I just did! You know me to be a fine swordsman! None shall beat me! None!"

Angus cursed under his breath, and Liam shook his head disapprovingly as they both stared at the emboldened girl before them. She was still breathing heavily from the physical exertion she had, in their opinion, unnecessarily put herself through.

Placing a friendly but firm arm around her shoulders, Liam tried to explain his feelings to her. "Aye, Anne you are good...very good, but you are yet still a woman; your strength not quite that of a man's. One day, your luck will run out, and you will meet someone of equal, if not better, expertise than you; someone with more skill and cunning. Hopefully, that day will never come. Until then, I beg you to have a little more caution and call on us when needed!" His voice ended with an exasperated tone, and his eyes rolled to the heavens.

"Oh piffle, Liam!" She shrugged his arm off angrily. "Just because I am a woman does not make me weaker than a man!" She pointed her finger at him. "I am just as good, if not better, than some of the guards here. I shall never be beaten!" she stated confidently. Liam and Angus

had been her bodyguards ever since she was but a babe in arms and had taught her all she knew, but it did not give them the right to judge her.

Her swordplay had started as a game, but as the years went by and Anne grew into a teenager, she realised she had a natural flare and passion for it. Her competitive nature gave her the yearning to learn more and more, until at her present age of twenty-one, she had decided to actually fight for real. The thrill that shook her body as she tallied swords with a real enemy was nothing compared to mere practice.

She always went undercover, and only a few personal guards knew of her exploits. They usually stood by her side, ready to protect her if things went wrong, but today she had chosen to take her life in her own hands and tackle the culprit on her own, for in her heart, she knew she was the best! No one would ever beat her!

"Mistress Anne! You father approaches!" Angus hissed from the doorway.

She had been so deep in thought that she hadn't heard the footsteps. Quick as lightning, Anne disappeared behind the tapestry on the wall. If her father, John Knightley, found out what she was doing, heaven knows what he would do. As far as he was concerned, his daughter was the epitome of femininity, and wearing britches would most probably make him keel over with shock. Added to which, she was putting her very life in danger—something he would certainly not abide.

She heard his booted feet echoing against the thick stone walls as he entered the chapel. Angus and Liam bowed as he entered. "Milord."

"One of the guards tells me we had an intruder."

"Aye, milord, we have detained him in the dungeon. We caught him trying to ransack the chapel. I think it wise that we keep the door locked until further notice."

"Aye, indeed. Have you seen him afore?"

Liam shook his head. "Nay, milord."

"'Tis hard times we live in that a man stoops so low as to steal religious artefacts." He shook his head sorrowfully, sighing heavily before continuing, "Have you seen Mistress Anne?"

"Aye, milord, she was in the chapel but a moment ago."

John Knightley paled, and Liam hastily replied, "She was in no danger, milord, I can assure you. We are always here to protect her."

Behind the tapestry, Anne chewed her lip, knowing that her previous actions had meant Liam now had to lie to her father. A tremour of guilt slipped through her, but she quickly dismissed it as she listened to her father continue.

"I know you do your best, Liam, but a father never stops worrying. If she returns, can you tell her I wish to see her at once?"

"Is all well, milord?"

"News has come from Eastergate that my father has been taken ill. We must make haste. The carriage is being made ready as I speak. I will be in the anteroom."

Anne gasped quietly. Her grandfather ill? She only saw him last month, and he had seemed in perfect health. The tapestry was drawn back, and Angus looked at her.

"Quickly... go to your room and change."

Anne nimbly dashed over to a stone cross, high on the wall, and clicked it sideways. The wall beneath it immediately began to move inwards, revealing a small doorway to the left. Slipping inside, Anne pressed a lever to conceal it again before running up the narrow stone staircase that led straight to the upper part of the house. She peered out the other end to make certain the coast was clear before heading to her chamber.

* * *

Once dressed in her usual feminine attire, Anne raced down to the anteroom and quickly entered. "Papa, I have been told grandfather is unwell!"

"Aye. Your aunt Hermione tells me his life hangs by a thread. We must make haste to see him."

"But what happened? He was quite well when last we saw him."

Her father turned to stare at her, his face saddened. "He has suffered a seizure, Anne. If God allows it, we will be able to be with him, but prepare yourself for the worst."

Anne's face fell, and her father placed a comforting arm around her slim shoulders. "Be brave, daughter. He may yet pull through. Hermione has a penchant for exaggeration, and I hope on this occasion that is all this is. But come, we shall keep his spirits up. He will not wish to see a dull face."

She smiled sorrowfully. "I will try, Papa, but I love him dearly. It will break my heart if he leaves us."

"And mine. Come, you must pack for the journey. I wish to depart within the hour."

* * *

They arrived at her grandfather's house, Harwick Manor, just before dusk. Anne's aunt, Hermione Knightley, came down the steps to greet them.

"Oh, brother dearest. I am so glad you are here. Poor Papa is most unwell." She sniffled into a handkerchief.

"Calm yourself, Hermione. I am here now, and together we will support one another." He placed an arm around her shoulders and led her inside the house. Anne followed quietly behind, realising how ill her grandfather must be for her aunt to show so much emotion. She was usually one to hide her feelings, telling Anne on more than one occasion that it was unladylike to laugh so loud when in company.

Anne scowled at the back of Hermione's head as the memories came back. What was wrong with laughing? Her aunt was a bit of a stick-in-the-mud, and although she didn't dislike her, she'd rather spend her time elsewhere. Unfortunately, with her grandfather ill, it would seem she had to endure her company for the foreseeable future. Her face fell as her thoughts returned to her grandfather and his ill health. Please God, he recovered.

Anne was shown to one of the bedrooms by a small maid called Helen, whilst her father and aunt spoke in the parlour.

"Would you like me to unpack for you, mistress?" Helen enquired.

"Aye, if you please." She walked to the dressing table and looked at her reflection. Her cheeks looked pale. She watched as Helen swiftly put her clothes away in the chest of drawers and large wardrobe. "Have you worked here long, Helen?"

"Aye, mistress. Nigh on two years, but I have only recently been promoted to ladies' maid."

Anne smiled. "Which is why I have not seen you before. Do you prefer your new post?"

"Aye." She looked furtively over her shoulder at the door. "I had better hurry about my chores, mistress. Your aunt dislikes me lingering."

Anne raised an eyebrow. "Hmm... I bet she does. She can be a little irksome, can she not?"

"Oh, mistress!" Helen's eyes grew wide, and she gave a small giggle before clapping her hand to her mouth.

Anna placed a finger on her lips and whispered, "Shh! The dragon may hear us!"

Helen curtsayed, and with a smile on her face, she left Anne alone in the bedroom. She peered out of the window and surveyed her grandfather's grounds. Harwick Manor was a grand building, set amidst vast grounds. He maintained them well with an army of grounds men and house maids, but he was no pompous individual like certain men she knew. No, her grandfather was very much down to earth, unlike her aunt. She rolled her eyes. How she would endure several days in her company she knew not. Exiting the room, she made her way down to the parlour to find out how her grandfather fared.

* * *

A week later, and Anne was finding life at Harwick Manor increasingly taxing. Her aunt's constant criticism was becoming tiring, and she would far rather be at home. On a good point, her grandfather was on the way to recovery despite his doctor's first statement to the contrary. Her grandfather had always had a strong constitution and had surprised everyone when he had suddenly asked for something to eat. As each day passed, he had become stronger and stronger, and now, he was nearly fully recovered.

But life at Harwick was too dull for Anne. She needed excitement. She craved it. She hadn't even been able to practice her sword sparring skills with Liam or Angus because of her father's constant presence. Frustrated, she'd only been able to watch them practice together, her hands itching to join them.

She sighed loudly and placed her forehead against the bedroom window pane, wondering how much longer she could endure such boredom.

Suddenly, movement at the end of the drive caught her attention. Two riders approached. Her heart lightened. At last! Visitors! She narrowed her eyes and tried to see if she recognised them. There were two gentlemen, and she knew neither. One was noticeably older than the other and quite portly. She dismissed him immediately and concentrated her attention on the younger man. He was laughing at something, revealing perfect white teeth, and through the open window she could hear how deep his voice was. Something about his tone sent shivers up her spine. As if sensing he was being watched, he suddenly looked up at the house. Anne drew back, but not before she'd seen his face. Lord, he was handsome!

She clapped a hand over her mouth. Fiddlesticks, she hoped he hadn't seen her spying. Quickly, she rushed over to her mirror and looked at her reflection, pinching her cheeks to add

some colour and making sure her hair looked neat. Satisfied she looked presentable, she slipped downstairs to greet the guests.

They were already in the parlour by the time Anne had descended the wide staircase. She sucked in a nervous breath and entered the room.

"There you are, m'dear!" said Hermione, walking over. She linked her arm through Anne's and led her forward towards their guests. "Sir Thomas, Sir Edward, may I introduce my niece, Anne Knightley. Anne, this is Sir Thomas Raveburn, one of King Charles's Generals and Sir Edward Clancy, one of our dear neighbours and a renowned horse breeder."

"How do you do." Anne curtsied politely. Close up, Sir Thomas was even more handsome than she'd first thought. He was tall, with broad shoulders and dressed very smartly. His dark brown hair hung to his shoulders, and he sported the fashionable cavalier beard and moustache.

He smiled. "Miss Knightley, I am honoured." His dark eyes sent a shiver through her, and she felt her cheeks blush hotly.

Sir Edward beamed broadly. "Well, where have you been hiding, milady? A beauty like you should not be hidden away, eh, Thomas?"

"Indeed not!" Sir Thomas drawled.

"How long will you be staying?" Sir Edward asked, drawing her away from her aunt to sit by the fireplace.

"Until my grandfather recovers, sir."

"Ah. I hear he is on the mend. It must have been a terrible worry for you, m'dear?"

"Aye, I am very fond of him."

"As are we all. Perhaps you would do me the honour of dining at my home one evening this week?"

Anne looked at her aunt, who nodded immediately and gushed. "Oh, that would be delightful, I am sure."

Thank God! Somewhere to go and something to do other than talk about ladylike pursuits. Thank the lord. Anne smiled brightly and looked at Sir Thomas. "Shall you be there, Sir Thomas?"

"Of course he will, is that not so, Thomas?" queried Sir Edward.

"I shall endeavour to come, but I have several appointments in town that I simply cannot miss." He fixed his gaze on her. "But I will try."

Anne's breathing quickened. He was so handsome, and his eyes were so dark brown as to be almost black. One could get lost in them. She felt her skin heat up as dark thoughts slipped through her mind, and she quickly focussed her attention on Sir Edward.

"Sir Edward, tell me about your horses, for I should love to hear about them."

He was only too happy to regale her with stories, some of which Sir Thomas joined in with, others he simply listened to.

When they were ready to leave, her aunt stood by her side on the front steps whilst she waved them off. "Is Sir Thomas Raveburn not one of the most handsome of men, my dear?" she uttered quietly.

"Aye, indeed he is," Anne responded warmly.

"And he is not yet married, my dear. What think you on that?"

Anne gulped. "I know not what to say, Aunt." Her aunt raised an eyebrow and looked at Anne pointedly, to which she responded, "Does he profess an interest in me?"

Hermione nodded. "Aye, my dear. From the look in his eyes, I would say he is more than interested."

Anne's eyes widened, and her small teeth nibbled her lower lip. Could she hope of marrying such a man?

* * *

The next day, Anne approached Liam as he polished his sword in the stables. "Good afternoon, Liam," she said brightly.

Liam looked up, and a slight frown marred his brow as he assessed her. "I know that tone, Mistress Anne."

Anne rolled her eyes. "What tone? I merely wished you a good afternoon."

"Aye, I know. but it was the tone you used. What are you after?" He stood up and placed the tip of his sword on the floor. "No, actually let me guess." He narrowed his eyes and looked from her to the sword. "You want to practice your sword fighting."

Anne's eyes lit up. "Please, Liam! If we go into yonder field, no one will see us."

"If your father sees us, he will dismiss me instantly," he warned.

"Please, Liam," Anne pouted and stared up at him with big sorrowful eyes. He raised his eyes to the heavens.

"God save me! Very well then, but if you see anyone, anyone at all, you are to drop your sword instantly!"

"Of course." She grinned enthusiastically. At last, she would be able to vent some of her pent up energy. Sitting around talking about tapestry and fashion was boring beyond belief.

She bent down to pick up a sword, but Liam immediately stopped her. "Nay, I shall carry them, to be on the safe side." He picked up another sword and placed them under his arm. "Where are your father and aunt now?"

"Aunt Hermione is taking an afternoon nap, and Papa is talking to Grandfather. This is a perfect opportunity to practice."

"I hope you are telling the truth, miss, else we shall both be in grave trouble."

"Oh, believe me I know! Now make haste, time is of the essence." She rushed over to the doorway and waited impatiently for Liam to follow.

* * *

Sir Thomas rode along beside the meandering river, enjoying the peace of the countryside around him. He'd already given his mount a good gallop across the fields for exercise. Storm was a young stallion and full of energy, so he usually gave him full rein to gallop where he wanted, as he had today. Now, Storm was content to quietly walk along, giving Sir Thomas time to enjoy his surroundings.

Birdsong filled the air, along with the chirp of the occasional cricket. Summer. Such a lovely time of year. He closed his eyes and listened to the harmonious buzz of insects, a rare treat for one used to the rigours of court life. Suddenly, he became aware of another noise. Clashing metal, steel on steel. He frowned and looked around to find out where the sound was coming from. It was definitely nearby. Dismounting, he took Storm's reins and tied him to a low branch, before cautiously stepping forward, his hand on his sheathed sword in search of the source.

It didn't take him long to find. Keeping hidden behind a hedgerow, he watched in amazement as the petite Anne Knightley brandished her sword at a man much bigger than herself. At first, he thought she was in need of assistance, but when her easy laughter reached his ears, he realised she was actually having fun.

"Ha! Liam I had you that time!" she taunted.

"Not for long." Liam parried her attack, but Sir Thomas was surprised to see how good Anne was. Her strokes were quick, and she was light on her feet, her blonde ringlets bobbing around her pretty face as she parried back. Aye, she was very good, but it certainly wasn't the usual pastime for young ladies to be doing.

But why were they practicing out here, when they could just as easily stay on her grandfather's land? He soon came to the conclusion that she was forbidden to fight. It made sense. He wasn't sure he would like his daughter, if he had one, to brandish a dangerous sword. He wondered if he should make himself known or keep quiet. Deciding on the former, he stepped forward to confront them.

* * *

Anne nearly died of fright when Sir Thomas appeared from behind the hedgerow. Liam hadn't seen him, and the moment Anne faltered, he took advantage, pinning his sword to her chest, grinning triumphantly.

"God's bones!" she gasped. Confused, Liam looked over his shoulder, wondering who she was talking to and then did a double take as he realised they had been discovered.

"Milord!" gasped Liam, quickly moving his sword away from Anne.

"I gather your father does not know you sword fight?" Sir Thomas addressed Anne, his voice stern.

She squirmed under his gaze, but defiantly raised her chin. "Nay, he does not. Are you going to tell him?"

"Not on this occasion." He turned a disapproving gaze on Liam. "You should know better than to disobey your master. On this occasion, I will remain silent, but you will refrain from encouraging Mistress Anne any further!"

"Aye, milord," Liam said humbly.

"It is not Liam's fault. I asked him to practice with me!" huffed Anne. "You have no reason to speak to him so!"

"I have every reason, milady, and I suggest you show a bit of humility." He turned back to Liam. "You may leave us, I wish to have a quiet word with Mistress Anne alone."

Liam looked back at Anne, awaiting her confirmation. She nodded at him, and after gathering up their swords, he departed back to the house.

"What do you do, sir, creeping around like that? Is this your usual behaviour?" Anne demanded angrily.

"I am a General, milady. 'Tis in my blood to seek out perpetrators of crime, however little. You, milady, sail close to the wind, do you not?"

"Meaning?" she asked sharply.

"Meaning, you are acting against your father's wishes. I would advise you against such actions. Firstly, because it is not seemly that a lady brandishes a sword, and secondly, your servant would be dismissed if found out."

"Nay, he would not! My father may have his rules, but he would not be so harsh." She lied, looking him up and down before sneering. "Obviously, you do not possess such a forgiving disposition, sir!"

"Do not antagonise me, milady, for I can easily inform your father of your actions should I decide to."

Anne's temper began to reach boiling point. Oh, how she wished Liam had left his swords behind, so she could parry a few strokes with this arrogant fellow! Her eyes settled on Sir Thomas's sword, and she thought about disarming him. But when her gaze flicked back to his, she noticed his eyes had turned to steel. He had ascertained her intentions.

"Do not even think it, milady, for I will have you over me knee before you can even touch the blade!" he said menacingly.

"Over your knee?" Anne gaped at him. "H-How dare you, sir!"

He moved his hand over the hilt of his sword and withdrew it slightly. "No, milady. I dare you! Take this sword and see what happens."

"Oh, you great lummo!" she spat angrily, and turning her back on him, she began to stalk away, back to the house. How could she have entertained the idea that he would make an admirable suitor! Huh! She balked at his authority, but something in his tone made her realise he was indeed capable of carrying out his threat.

She had only taken a few steps when she realised he was laughing, a low, deep, chesty rumble. She spun on her heels and glared at him furiously. How dare he laugh at her! The red mist of anger descended over any logical reasoning, and she lunged for him, hoping to catch him off guard. Unfortunately, she wasn't dealing with any normal man. Thomas's fighting skills were akin to none, and within moments, he had her pinned to the ground, her arms above her head.

Sir Thomas leaned back on his haunches and shook his head, holding her easily with one hand. "My, you are a feisty baggage, milady, and one that does not seem to understand a warning when given one."

"Go hang yourself!" she said rudely, annoyed that he had so easily rendered her immobile. She kicked out with her small boots, aiming for his shin and rejoiced when she heard his sharp intake of breath.

"It would seem, milady, that there is only one method that will make you see reason."

"Let me go...let me *go*!" She struggled fiercely as he pulled her upwards, but his strength was too great, and in no time at all, she was face down over his raised knee as he placed his booted foot on an exposed tree root. Her hands scraped the ground for balance.

"Fear not, milady. That tongue of yours will learn the hard way to contain its outbursts!"

She felt her skirts pulled up and her bloomers parted, and struggle as hard as she might, she couldn't get free. She cursed him and kicked her legs, but nothing, it would seem, would stop him in his quest to chastise her!

The resounding sounds of his large hand clapping down on her tender backside echoed through the open air.

Sir Thomas's hand came down hard on her bottom, again and again, in rhythmic strokes. Her body jolted forward with each spank, and she cried out indignantly. "Stop! It hurts! Stop! *Stop I say!*"

His hand continued, regardless of her shrieks of outrage. Her slim legs kicked uselessly into the air, her hands scrabbling around in front of her, trying to pull herself away from his punishing hand.

"Learn to behave, milady, and this will not happen. You seem to be under the illusion that there are no consequences for your rash words."

He continued the assault.

Her bottom was stinging and was given no time to recover between each smack of his large, iron-like hand. She writhed on his knee, seeking escape from the torturous onslaught.

A tear slipped down her cheek, and she quickly wiped it away, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of seeing how much he was hurting her.

"You are mean, sir! Please...stop!"

With a final swat to each cheek, he finally ceased, letting his hand lie still on her bruised, heated flesh.

"Now, milady. You owe me an apology."

"I most certainly do n..."

Smack!

"I *said*...you owe me an apology!"

She grit her teeth and closed her eyes tight before spitting out. "I am *so* sorry!"

He smacked her again.

"Ow! Desist! I apologised, did I not?"

"Ah, but you did not mean it. I would have a sincere apology, milady, nothing less!"

Realising she had little choice but to obey him, she ground out, "Then I am truly sorry for my behaviour. It will not happen again!" Of that she was certain. She would rather run him through with her sword next time than be subjected to a sore bottom.

Finally, he let her up. She bit her lip as she laid her hands upon her heated flesh. Oh Lord, that had hurt! She let her dress fall back into place, to hide her modesty, and backed away from him, her eyes full of loathing.

"You will regret your actions, sir!"

"Nay, milady. I will not." His eyes pierced hers. "But you will heed me and refrain from deceiving your father. Next time you wish to practice your sword play, you will ask permission, and if it is denied then I trust you will have the common sense to obey his wishes!"

She didn't trust herself to speak, for she knew that she would carry on, regardless, and the less Sir Thomas Raveburn knew, the better. Instead, she glared at him sullenly before turning on her heel and running towards home.