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A Touch of Silk

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CHAPTER ONE

It was a raw, blustery Monday in late March, and a biting wind laden with bursts of icy rain whipped the bare branches of the trees in King's Bench Walk. Anthony Cross, a tall, dark-haired barrister in his mid-thirties, swung himself off his bicycle and eased it into the bike rack. As he did so, he caught sight of a familiar, silver-haired figure in a cashmere coat crossing the cobbles.

'Morning,' he called out.

Leo Davies smiled as he drew near, his heart lifting in genuine pleasure at the sight of the younger man. 'Good morning. How was the holiday?'

'Barbados was excellent, thanks. Bit of a pain coming back to this.'

He locked his bike and the two of them made their way together up King's Bench Walk to the chambers where they both worked. 5 Caper Court, one of the most renowned sets of commercial chambers in the Temple, was home to

some forty or so barristers, whose interests were protected and careers guided under the benign supervision of Henry Dawes, the head clerk, and his deputy, Felicity Waller.

It was Felicity who greeted Leo and Anthony as they came into the clerks' room that morning. Buxom, cheerful, with dark curly hair and an irrepressible personality, her appearance was somewhat at odds with the dignity of her office. Instead of the customary black-and-white business attire of most of her colleagues, she dressed to suit her mood, expressed today in the form of a very short bright red skirt, black tights and knee-length boots, and a tight-fitting blue woollen jumper.

'Morning, Mr D,' she called out cheerily. He was her favourite amongst the tenants of 5 Caper Court. She thought of him as one of the few genuine people in chambers. He might be the most brilliant commercial QC in London, with a raft of well-heeled international clients and a reputation for being both formidable and charming. She liked the fact that, unlike most of his peers, Leo had come up the hard way, from working-class beginnings in a Welsh village, with none of the benefits of a public school education and the network of opportunity that went with it. He had also helped her weather a variety of storms in her life, both emotional and professional, and she had a bit of a crush on him – he might be nearer sixty than fifty, but with those eyes, and that beautiful silver hair, he was still a looker.

'Good morning, Felicity.'

'You know you've got a con with Bilboroughs soon?'

'I do indeed. I thought I'd be here half an hour ago. The traffic on the Embankment was hellish.'

‘Maybe you should be like Mr Cross and get yourself a bike. You’d get around a lot quicker.’

‘You’re probably right,’ said Leo, ‘but I don’t really want to come into chambers sweating, and then have to spend half an hour showering and changing. To say nothing of breathing in a load of particulates.’

At that moment a blonde woman in a black suit strode into the clerks’ room, took her post from the pigeonhole and left without a glance or word of acknowledgement to the others.

‘Who was that?’ asked Anthony.

‘Natalie King,’ replied Henry. ‘She joined us from 7 KBW while you were away.’ Henry Dawes was in his late thirties, with a mournful demeanour that masked a light soul and a loving heart. He had long nursed a deep and abiding affection for Felicity, but an incipient romance between them a few years ago – which had withered and died on Felicity’s part within a few months – had left a mark on their otherwise harmonious relationship.

‘Oh yes – the Claire Underwood of the commercial world. Scary.’ Anthony sighed as he unzipped his parka. ‘I don’t know who anyone is any more – hardly anyone comes into chambers, and everyone seems to get e-briefs. Give me a hard copy any day. The last time I was in court they spent fifteen minutes trying to locate a witness bundle that had simply disappeared from the system overnight.’

‘Bit of an exaggeration to say no one comes in any more,’ observed Leo. ‘They have to, for all our endless committee meetings. We seem to be forming a new committee every week. The bloody things are so disruptive.’

‘The younger element seem to like them,’ observed Henry.

‘The Hitler Youth lot, you mean – they just love structures and rules. Sometimes it feels like being run by a kind of junior thought police. Where’s the individualism? The whole place is becoming so corporate.’

‘You’re such a rebel, Mr D.’ Felicity smiled.

‘As I’m constantly being reminded.’

Leo and Anthony left the clerks’ room and went upstairs.

Leo paused on the landing outside his room. ‘Speaking of meetings, the pupillage committee is meeting tomorrow – you’re on that, aren’t you?’

‘Afraid so. I couldn’t think of a decent excuse not to be.’

‘Maybe you can give my candidate, Alistair Egan, a bit of a leg-up,’ said Leo, as he keyed in his security code. ‘He did a mini-pupillage with you, didn’t he?’

‘Yes. I liked him. Seemed very much on the ball.’

‘He’s remarkably promising. I want to make sure he gets an interview.’ He gave Anthony a glance. ‘Care to come in for a moment? I was instructed on a grounding case recently, and I could do with your views.’

Anthony followed Leo into his room, which was spotlessly tidy, free of the clutter of briefs and papers that usually littered the other tenants’ rooms. Neat shelves containing legal casebooks lined one wall, and on the opposite wall hung a series of German expressionist woodcuts. The furniture consisted of nothing more than an extremely expensive and well-sprung Herman Miller office chair, a polished walnut desk, and a large circular conference table. The only items that gave any clue to the inner life of Leo Davies QC were two silver-framed photographs that stood on the desk – one of a pretty, smiling young woman, Leo’s daughter from a fleeting relationship twenty-seven years previously, and the

other of his twelve-year-old son, Oliver, the product of a short-lived marriage that had disintegrated over a decade ago. Leo and his ex-wife Rachel, a City solicitor, remained on amenable terms and shared the care of Oliver, but the relationship was strained by the fact that Rachel, even though she had remarried, still had strong feelings for her ex-husband – feelings of both love and animosity.

Anthony took a seat. Leo hung up his coat, extracted a bundle of papers from his briefcase, and fired up his laptop. He glanced at Anthony, taking in his easy, athletic posture and the holiday tan that enhanced his good looks, remembering the day he had first set foot in this room, raw, fresh-faced, barely more than a boy in his Marks & Spencer suit, eager to learn and please. Now, some fifteen years later, he was an assured, much-sought-after junior barrister with a reputation for speed and thoroughness, a healthy bank balance and discerning tastes for the finer things in life. Leo felt he had been responsible for a good part of Anthony's development. He liked to think his mentoring had been more than merely professional, that he had educated Anthony socially, artistically, intellectually – and sexually, too, on the basis that such beauty could not be allowed to go to waste. He felt no guilt about that. Leo was beyond guilt. He had always taken his pleasures where he found them, with men and women, being of the view that everyone's sexual sensibilities were simply there for the awakening. For Leo, his own personal pleasure had always been paramount, and if he was dimly aware that Anthony, in the wake of their occasional sexual encounters – and nothing had occurred for a long time now – felt any self-disgust or unhappiness, that had merely added a certain relish.

Leo's gaze shifted from Anthony to his laptop screen.
‘Let me just bring up the instructions.’

While Leo scrolled through pages of documents, Anthony glanced at the photograph of Leo's daughter, Gabrielle, with a flicker of disquiet. It was in the past now, but he couldn't help thinking that the Fates that had brought her into his life had been particularly malicious. Had he known she was Leo's daughter, would he ever have slept with her? The whole thing was bizarrely confused. Until a few years ago Leo himself hadn't even known he had a daughter until, armed with background information from her mother, Gabrielle had tracked him down. Anthony couldn't help wondering now, looking back, if he had been attracted to her because she reminded him of Leo. But that romance was dead and done now, and probably just as well. A complex case had taken him to Singapore for months on end, and the thing had simply fizzled out – though he'd been surprised and mildly hurt by the speed with which her affection and enthusiasm had cooled. Leo had been ostensibly indifferent, but it was only when the Singapore case settled that Anthony realised that it had been Leo who had been largely instrumental in getting him instructed on it in the first place.

Leo, Leo. Anthony studied the older man as he gazed at the laptop screen, its faint light etching the sharpness of his cheekbones, and the wing-like darkness of eyebrows that contrasted with his thick silver hair. Those eyes, too – a piercing blue that could flash with inviting warmth or glacial coldness, depending on his mood. The charisma of the man was undeniable. In his early days at 5 Caper Court, when he was young and idealistic, Anthony's heart

used to contract with pleasure at hearing Leo's voice, his laughter in the clerks' room, or the sound of his swift footstep on the stairs. The knowledge that at any moment he would see Leo, be able to talk to and listen to him, would set off shockwaves of excitement. At twenty-one, he had never met anyone so witty, so knowledgeable about life and all the fine things to be had from it, and at the same time so profoundly intelligent, so passionate about the law, and with such a razor-sharp intellect. That he and Leo came from similar backgrounds – families without much money, a grammar school and non-Oxbridge education – had made him feel they had a special bond. Infatuation, pure and simple. It was undeniably still there. But it had taken some time to find out just how coolly negligent Leo could be where people were concerned, how careless of their feelings. He remembered all too clearly the night their friendship had tipped into something else – something he still couldn't understand or properly acknowledge. So yes – just as well he and Gabrielle were no longer seeing one another.

'Here we go,' said Leo, leaning back in his chair. 'The *Alpha Six*, bulk carrier, loaded a cargo of fifty thousand tons of iron ore in Liberia, and grounded half a mile out of port. A constructive total loss. We're on for the charterers.'

'Don't tell me. The cargo shifted due to excessive moisture content, and the shipowners are saying the charterers falsified the cargo declaration?'

'How did you guess? Our P&I club has had surveyors running around out there for weeks. I know you had a similar case a few months ago, so I thought I'd pick your brain.'

Anthony raised an eyebrow. ‘As cases go, isn’t this rather below your pay grade?’

‘The charterer is Montial. They used to put all their work Charles Brownwood’s way, but he’s moving to the bench, and they want someone new to instruct. If this one goes well it could open up a lucrative line of work.’

‘Nice to have the world’s largest commodities trader briefing you on a regular basis.’

‘Quite. Also, this shipment was one of the first to come out of their new mining facility in Liberia. They want to be seen to be running a reliable operation, and this incident doesn’t exactly promote that image.’

They discussed the case for fifteen minutes or so, then Anthony glanced at his watch. ‘I’d best make tracks. I’m due in court in an hour.’ As he rose to leave, he couldn’t help asking, ‘How’s Gabrielle these days?’

‘Fine, so far as I know. I hardly see her from one month to the next. She’s got a new tenancy now in a criminal set in Bedford Row. Or maybe you already knew that.’

‘Yes, I heard.’ He’d never discussed with Leo his break-up with Gabrielle. What was there to say, in any event? ‘Right, I’ll get going. See you later.’

The door closed. Leo sat, reflecting. Anthony evidently still had feelings for Gabrielle. But it was for everyone’s good that that relationship had come to an end. It hadn’t been difficult to sow the seeds of its destruction, by dropping a mention to a friend of a friend of Gabrielle’s the manufactured rumour that Anthony was conducting quite a steamy affair with one of the female partners in the Singapore law firm. As he’d anticipated, Gabrielle had picked it up and come to him with her concerns, and it

had been the easiest thing in the world to tell her that, regretfully, he'd heard the same thing, at the same time advising her that rather than confronting Anthony with his behaviour, she'd be best off cutting her losses, retaining her dignity and cool, and letting the relationship peter out. Touching, he reflected, how readily his daughter had believed him. But he had acted out of her best interests. Given the history between himself and Anthony, any relationship between Anthony and his daughter had seemed positively unhealthy. There were plenty of other young men for her to fall in love with.

As he moved his laptop and papers over to the conference table for the meeting, his mobile phone rang. The sight of Sergei's name on the screen gave him one of those delicious, heart-stopping moments that didn't come often enough these days. He let the phone buzz for a moment, then answered it, keeping his tone casual.

'Sergei – it's been a while.'

'Hi, Leo.' The voice was warm, dark, Russian-accented.
'How are you?'

'I'm well – you?'

'Tired. Got in at seven this morning from New York.' His voice held a yawn. Leo imagined his lean dancer's body stretched out on some hotel bed. 'The company is in London for two weeks till the end of April. I thought maybe we could get together.'

Leo allowed a second's hesitation before responding.
'Listen, I'm just about to go into a meeting. How about if I call you later?'

'Yeah, sure.' Leo heard the shrug of disappointment in Sergei's voice. Perfect.

He ended the call. Nothing for six months – and Leo knew for a fact that the Barinov Ballet Company had had two tour dates in London in the past year – and suddenly he rang out of the blue wanting to meet up. As though he was the one who set the terms. Leo pondered for a moment, wondering how to play this. Not to call back, to let the fortnight pass without seeing Sergei and enjoying his beautiful body, would be cutting off his own nose to spite his face. It was just a question of making it clear who was in control. And that, of course, was part of the fun.

Shortly after six Leo drove back from chambers to his home in Chelsea. He had bought the handsome three-storey house in Gratton Crescent a few years ago. It was larger than he needed, but it gave Oliver his own bedroom and playroom, and Leo liked the well-proportioned rooms with their long windows, and the leafy peace of the large rear garden. He eased the Aston Martin into a parking bay and got out. The blustery weather earlier in the day had died away, and for the first time, the air held a mild note of spring. The clocks had gone forward the previous weekend, and the evening sky was still light. He went up the steps and unlocked the front door. The house was silent. As he took off his overcoat he noticed that the coatrack was laden with what seemed like a ridiculous number of Sarah's jackets and coats. Why couldn't she put stuff back in her wardrobe? It made the hallway look spectacularly messy. On impulse he gathered them from the hooks and carted them all upstairs, and dumped them in her bedroom. She'd left in a rush the day before, headed off on a spa break with some girlfriends, and the room was in its usual untidy state, with clothes over chairs, the curtains still

drawn, and a scattering of make-up on her dressing table.

He gazed around the room in irritation. As an on-off girlfriend, he liked having Sarah around. She was a clever, stimulating girl, and extremely sexy. She understood him in ways that few other people did. But when, in a moment of unusual susceptibility, he had suggested she should move in with him, he hadn't realised that enforced companionship might rob their relationship of one of its most attractive aspects – unpredictability. True, she was volatile and impulsive, and hugely undomesticated, and led her own life much of the time. But she took for granted the rather messy space she now occupied in his life. Sexually she was too available. She had made him too available. He compensated for all of this by seeing other people on the side – being careful that she should never find out.

His mind moved to Sergei. It might be irksome that the touring life of a ballet dancer made it impossible to predict when an opportunity might arise to continue their clandestine affair, but surely that was the point? Therein lay the excitement, the challenge. He took his phone from his pocket and rang Sergei's number.

'Hi.' Sergei's tone was light, expectant. He sounded relieved to get Leo's call. Which was just the balance Leo wanted.

'Hi. Are you still tired, or did you manage to get some sleep?'

'A few hours. I'm feeling OK.'

'Good. I thought maybe you'd like to come round this evening. Have some dinner, maybe stay the night – unless you have rehearsals tomorrow?'

‘We don’t start rehearsing till Wednesday. Everyone’s jet-lagged. Yeah, I’d like to come over. Give me an hour.’

Leo returned his phone to his pocket and went downstairs to the kitchen to put together some ingredients for dinner. Something light, perhaps, bearing in mind the pleasurable exertions that lay ahead.