

The dining room at Dyers Buildings is a narrow one but with Emma, John and Emma Jane put to bed it manages to accommodate the Walker family and the three Roscoes tolerably well, with room still to squeeze behind a chair if one were to hold their breath. Old Mr Roscoe sits at the head of the table, weathered cheeks mottled from the effects of a particularly strong wine. He pours himself a fourth glass, smiles widely at the family, flashing teeth that remind Sarah of bleached pebbles.

‘The law is a fickle thing, and why I don’t practice now; it was a great disappointment to me. Too many wrongs for which those in power are more than willing to turn a blind eye.’ He speaks in legal sugar, a smooth rich honey that only years of experience under a cap and gown can lend to a voice. ‘But,’ he continues, tilting his glass in mock salute, ‘I am nothing if not an optimist. I can only hope the legal minds of the future can work with the friends of reform in this country.’ Robert’s father leans his elbows heavily on the table. ‘You, Micaiah,’ he says, addressing Sarah’s brother, rather than Mr Walker who shares his name, ‘can only expect to achieve great things if you practice fortitude and act for the greater good of all concerned.’

Beside her Cajah straightens his back. ‘I fully intend to, sir.’

‘Have you decided on a discipline?’

‘I was thinking estate law.’

Two years before, Cajah had been apprenticed to their father but soon found he had no taste for buttons and trim, abandoning Mr Walker for ledgers and ink instead. He is, in the New Year, to be articled under Robert at the New Inn.

‘It’s a steady discipline, I grant you. But will it make a difference?’

‘I wish only to make a living.’

‘Indeed? But there’s so much more you could apply yourself to! The law needs young blood. It does us no good holding on to the past. We must embrace change!’ Roscoe is bright with passion. ‘The old laws are archaic, practiced by

solicitors and politicians who are content to let them thrive. We live in a world where the cogs of reform must be well-oiled. You would do well, Micaiah, to consider another discipline, one that might further not only your cause but those of the people.'

William Roscoe is a man of influence and many faces: a botanist, a banker, a solicitor, an abolitionist, facts which seem lost on Cajah; her brother's nod is polite, his pointed face courteous, but Sarah sees the conceit that simmers beneath it. He has no interest in hard work, in doing more than is needed to get by. Cajah views the world in money, believes that London will open up to him in pound notes like a map to a sailor just as long as he chooses the safest path. A tailor will not do, for a man in trade might lose it. A legal mind will always be needed, he says, but not one that risks the crown's displeasure.

Roscoe returns his glass to the table. 'Whatever happened to that young man from Manchester, Mrs Walker? Met him last year at your lodgings. He was a reform man, was he not? Played some small part in the Peterloo trial if I remember correctly.'

Sarah pauses, soup spoon halfway to her mouth. She shoots a nervous glance down the table at her father. His face is lowered, jaw set. He grips his wineglass so hard Sarah is afraid it will splinter. Mrs Walker clears her throat.

'He left for America. Left rather sudden.'

'Ah, a shame. He showed such promise. But perhaps the new world held more excitement for him. Yes,' Roscoe adds, musing, 'a great shame. You could have learnt a lot from him, Micaiah. He was so keen, when I spoke to him, on championing the reformative cause. I found him to be a man of discernment, of great passion.'

There is a snort, hastily concealed. Roscoe's eyebrows shoot up. Cajah wipes his mouth with a napkin, tilts his head with a smile that has Sarah's insides twisting.

‘Mr Bidwell was a man for passion, so I understand. But then, all his talk of reform would make him hot-blooded.’

‘Cajah ...’

Mr Walker, this. But Roscoe is engaged.

‘Oh?’

‘Well, when a man gets himself involved with people who make it their duty to cause disruption of the peace, is it any wonder that the man would then be reckless in other ways?’

‘But my dear boy, don’t you think that passion is the key to the practice of law? That without it, there can be no effective trial, no conviction, no fair outcome?’

‘Not when that passion corrupts others.’

The statement pools between them, loaded, awkward. Roscoe seems to understand there is some other influence here, something he does not understand, and it takes him a moment to navigate these new waters but as his mouth begins to drop to form a rejoinder, Sarah’s aunt sits forward, chin doubling into her neck.

‘When do you return to Liverpool, sir?’

She is a barrel of a woman: thick of shoulder, round of face, but every inch as hard as Mr Walker, never hesitating to remind them of it with a pair of flashing eyes and sharp tongue. She dips a hunk of bread into her soup, shakes it of drips, and offers it to the pug, Horace, at her feet who snuffles it noisily.

The older man blinks at the interruption, the change of tide. ‘Tomorrow,’ he answers after a moment. ‘I’d prefer to stay longer but alas, business calls.’

The family – whose collective tension had begun to coil tighter and tighter like the springs of a dray – visibly relax. Sarah sends her aunt a watery smile. Her father’s grip on the wineglass softens. The candles flicker merrily in their sticks. Old Mr Roscoe heaves a jovial laugh.

‘Well, now,’ he says. ‘Perhaps, Micaiah, you are right. Politics can often bring out the worst in us. Estate law, you say? It pays well.’

He clumsily raises his glass, passes a considering gaze around the table where it settles on Sarah. He eyes alight with interest.

‘I’ve seen you little during my visits here. Why is that?’

The springs imperceptibly tighten once more. Sarah’s next words come in a rush to fill the space, to avoid more awkwardness, the familiar pointed silence of words meant – at all costs – to be left unsaid.

‘I spend much of my time at home, sir, looking after our lodgers. Our newest is the essayist William Hazlitt.’

Roscoe raises his eyebrows, furred half-moons. ‘Indeed? I knew him, briefly, some years ago. Very opinionated, I found ...’

‘He does like to talk,’ Sarah says quietly, wondering at the censure in his tone.

‘And what does he talk of?’

Betsey, who has remained silent in the face of conversations of which she had no understanding, pipes up then with childish eagerness: ‘He reads to her!’

Mr Walker raises his head with narrow-eyed interest. Sarah purses her lips, kicks her sister lightly under the table. Grumbling Betsey shuffles further down into her seat, mulishly fiddles with her spoon.

‘Reads to you?’

Robert this. Their eyes meet.

‘How generous of him,’ Roscoe is saying. He has discarded his wineglass, attention fully fixed upon her. ‘What does he read?’

The whole table looks. Sarah’s face flames.

It had begun, of course, with Byron. Hazlitt had dabbled briefly in Wordsworth, moved swiftly to Shakespeare and Scott, promised her the joys of Milton. He dipped in and out of the classics, the more modern stuff – *you like variety, don’t you?* – but then Hazlitt had lifted the sheets from his desk and begun to read them with such a great show of pride and passion that Sarah often found herself forgetting to work at all.

‘His essays, sir. He hopes to publish them in the spring.’

‘That doesn’t sound to your taste,’ Martha comments, her surprise obvious.

‘I enjoy listening.’

And yet. She is ashamed to say she struggles to follow them. She had really tried at first, but before she had time to decipher one comment from the next Hazlitt had already moved on, leaving Sarah in an intellectual mire. It is easier and more pleasurable, Sarah finds, simply to listen.

But Roscoe is nodding. His powdered wig slips. He pushes it back. ‘Well, now. How about that, eh? You have patience for a literary critic. That shows a certain fortitude of mind, I do believe.’

Over the table her mother watches. When Sarah meets her gaze Mrs Walker shakes her head; the slightest of movements. Beside her, Grandmother Hilditch slurps noisily at her soup.

‘William Hazlitt is a brilliant speaker.’

Her father’s voice, directed at her. Sarah wheels her eyes round in shock. It is the first time in months he has addressed her with anything other than cool disregard.

‘We attended one of his lectures once, your aunt and I. At the Russell Institution, ten years hence?’ Sarah’s aunt nods in reply. Mr Walker turns back to her, eyes hard as bullets. ‘Listen well, Sarah. You’ll benefit from his learning. Mark it.’

It is praise of sorts, censure too, but Sarah recognises it as an acknowledgment that does not, for once, stem from his shame of her and Sarah reddens from it, this small unexpected notice.

It is, at least, a start.