

## Secret Beneath the Concrete

It had to be done. And quickly. I placed the last brick, concealing our entrance.

“Why is it so dark in here?” Aisha asked, her voice trembling as her tiny, dirty hands curled around her mother’s soiled skirt.

“Hush, Aisha,” the tired woman scolded, bouncing her knee to soothe the child, to release some of her own growing tension.

I wanted to turn and warn them not to speak, to remind them that not a sound could escape this dark space between the cellar wall and the concrete structure of our old house. Not a sound or the men talking to Father upstairs would hear. But my eyes were too fixed on the small crack between the bricks exposing the adjacent room.

Voices grew upstairs, as Father tried to carry on with the men, working to buy us needed time. He would be proud to know that everyone was hidden quickly, this time.

I could not say that I was unafraid. It was hard to keep my hands from trembling when the men pounded on our door—Father telling Mother to finish her ironing upstairs, loud enough for us to hear. We knew what this meant.

I had rushed to open up the entrance that led to this space—two heart-pounding minutes of scuffling feet and worried whispers to get everyone crowded in, and the entrance concealed.

A clatter on the floorboards above us, accompanied by the sharp clomp of boots, caused little Aisha to whimper again, and I tensed. Aisha was the youngest of our company—too young to understand why her widowed mother worked to keep her silent. Yet she knew first-hand the dangers of these men. Two other women sat on strewn boxes in the cold darkness, one with streaks of grey poking out under her kerchief, framing lines that creased her weathered face. The other, a youth about my age, looked as though she had seen more than my mother ever had.

I had little time to picture the pained images imbedded in their fear, for heavy boots creaked down our wooden steps leading into the simple concrete basement. I listened and guessed there to be at least four men.

My peep-hole only allowed me to see a section of the space, but I could hear Father's voice clearly.

"And this is where we keep our perishables," he explained. I could almost see him in my mind's eye, sweeping his weathered hand around the dim-lit room to show Mother's assortment of jams and preserves for special occasions...that may not come.

A rough, scratchy grunt was the only response Father got.

Footsteps moved from the landing to the corner of the room, and now I could see whom one set belonged to.

An officer—his brown suit crisp and clean, with hardly a crease anywhere but the elbows. If it weren't for his eyes, he might have seemed a nice sort of man. It wasn't even the eyes' darkness that made them unfriendly; it was the expression—a sort of heartless, unaffected look—that made me feel an unexplained chill.

The officer turned, hands clasped behind his back, and paced towards me. My heart stopped its steady beat, and in the back of my mind, I willed poor Aisha to stay silent.

He walked up to our wall and paused.

“Please don’t find us—” my thoughts cried out, so loudly I feared they would be heard.

The man stood and surveyed the wall, looking between the jars lining that room. Searching. Drawing closer.

Thirty silent seconds passed as Aisha’s mother held her tight, and the women sat motionless on the crates. Thirty seconds of the official scanning our wall; seconds that determined how short their lives...my life would be.

Painfully still.

Silent.

Then the official reached for a jar, exposing our space, and twisted its lid.

*Pop!*

Our bodies convulsed, and the woman firmly clamped her hand across Aisha’s gaping mouth.

Another grunt and pause.

“I hear,” the man’s low, gruff voice muttered, “you are known for your jam.”

“Oh, yes,” Father said, the words tripping from his lips. “Best in the district. May we offer you a taste before you leave?”

I did not hear the officer’s reply. Nor did I hear the footsteps returning to the kitchen. I only witnessed the root of freedom growing in our little, concrete cell: the

exhale of the women as they worked to breathe again, and the sight of the widow's silent tear rejoicing for another day.