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Mr. Kay
English 2
Todd Advisory

Secrets in the Dark

Chapter 1

As soon as my eyes opened up to the warm glow of morning I knew something was wrong. I stumbled out of bed and dashed to the window. I slammed it closed and quickly pulled down the blackout curtains. How stupid I had been to fall asleep with the windows uncovered.

As I tried to walk back to bed, my head lurched backwards. In all my ferocity, I had closed the window on my hair. Too tired to try to go back to sleep, I slumped to the floor against the wall, out of breath from the sudden commotion.

My ground floor apartment was completely dark now, safe. It had been three years since the government had decided that the best way to monitor crime would be complete surveillance for every civilian 24/7.

Soon after the 2022 inflation, The Greater Depression occurred and forced people to turn to stealing as a means to survive. So, the U.S. government put into law that everyone had to have an unobscured camera in every room of their house. The Inspection, it was called. The worst part about The Inspection was that the government sold access to the camera system to a large social media site called Beta. This social media site selected a random hour of everyone's footage and posted it online. No one could stop it from uploading, or take it down after it had been put online. Every inch of the outside world was also soaked with cameras, just itching to film a slip up.

My only safety net was the blackout curtains. You couldn't directly cover the cameras stationed in every room, but they wouldn't question if you just had your lights out. Whenever anyone looked at my cameras, all they would see was an inky silhouette peeking in and out of the screens. That's all I would ever be.

Chapter 2

I locked eyes with the camera on my way out of the house. I knew they couldn't see me, or the hidden trap door I was pulling open slowly, but it still felt like there was always an Optic watching me. The Optics were the officials whose job it was to watch all the cameras and flag any suspicious activity.

The government had commissioned tech giants to create an AI algorithm to monitor everyone, but still used The Optics as means of more personal observation. The Optics were made up of wealthy individuals who used their power to get jobs watching and judging others. Because of this, a ton of the warrants and citations issued were false, made by bullies who just wanted to test their strength over society.

I could feel the Optic through the camera, itching to see what was behind my dark screen. Confident with my blackout curtains, I gave the corner camera a wink, and leapt into the tunnel. Tracing my hands through the familiar cracks on the stone walls, I found my way through the underground maze. My friend Kat and I had found the tunnels years ago. We suspected they used to be maintenance tunnels, since they followed the electrical grid of the city. The only light down here was the faint dim of the candles we had placed to lead the way. Turning the corner, I was pummeled by a dark silhouette.

Kat and I had crashed into each other and were actively scraping ourselves off the floor.

“Oww,” I said, rubbing my head.

“Did you see the post?” Kat exclaimed, taking my hands and pulling me to my feet just so she could shake my shoulders frantically.

“What post?” I inquired, clueless.

“Your camera’s post on Beta!”

“So? What’s there to see? I made sure my curtains were drawn this time.” I really had double-checked after last week’s fiasco.

“That’s not the point! People have been talking...saying they saw things...illegal things,” Kat said timidly. She stopped shaking me and looked at me closely.

“What do you mean by illegal things? All they could have recorded was me sleeping,” I said, shocked that Kat would even consider that I would endanger us.

“People are saying that they saw more than one silhouette. They are saying they saw people come in through the window after curfew and then never leave. And I mean a lot of people, like a group of ten just poof into thin air.”

“That’s ridiculous! I haven’t had anyone over in months!”

“I know, I know. I personally think that the so-called silhouettes just look like shadows in the moonlight, but you know how these conspiracy theorists are nowadays. They are saying you are smuggling people or something, like human trafficking. It’s crazy.”

My stomach dropped, this kind of activity would for sure get me flagged with The Optics. “Can’t people find something better to do with their lives than sitting in front of a screen and speculating about other people!” I yelled into the echoey tunnel, exasperated.

Kat reached over and put a comforting arm around me as we walked along the candle studded path to her house. “It would help if you didn’t live completely in the dark. Even though I don’t like it, I let my camera on for a couple hours everyday. It makes you seem more human, Iris. Then they will be less suspicious and leave you alone.”

“I guess so. I have always preferred the dark though,” I said, wondering if even talking to Kat down here was safe anymore.

Chapter 3

By the next day, I knew for sure that the Optics were watching me closely. I rarely went out for groceries anymore, but my fridge was on the verge of being hopelessly empty. So I left the house in the middle of the night when I thought less people would be out. I had never seen this particular cashier before, and his eyes lingered a little too long on the many cans of soup that were overflowing from my shopping basket.

Trying to break the ice, I blurted out, “I like to buy in bulk, you know? I don’t like going out much with all the cameras and everyone watching.”

“Who does?” the cashier grunted, but hidden under his red baseball cap was a sly smile.

I shrank away from him and rushed out with my groceries. On the way home, I caught the eerie glances of two other “civilians” on the empty streets. One was washing windows from

the inside of a storefront. He looked up from his work to peer at me in between windex sprays. The other was walking her dog, staring at me intently, and humming to a tune I couldn't quite place. The shiver going down my spine was all the proof I needed to know that she, and the others, were bad news.

I started to pick up my pace, half walking, half running back to my apartment building. My sneaker snagged on an uneven piece of concrete, and I tumbled forward, groceries falling out of my arms. I pulled myself up and turned around to pick up a can of beans. My eyes caught the glimpse of a red cap crossing the street. The cashier was strolling along, whistling the same tune as the woman walking her dog. The wind carried his terrifying song down the block to my ears, where I stood paralysed with fear. The flickering street lights seemed to panic within me. Suddenly the song stopped, and the cashier turned to face me from a block away. Even from that distance, I could tell his smile wasn't so sly anymore, but a toothy grin. I booked it to my apartment.

My shaky hands tried to fit my key into every other groove in the door besides the keyhole. Finally I heard the satisfying clink, and practically threw myself inside. I entered the dark apartment and rested a supportive hand on the wall, gasping for air.

“What’s the hurry?” said a rough voice from the shadows.

Chapter 4

I let out a sharp, piercing scream and backed away quickly to the door, my hand grasping for the doorknob behind me. I wrapped my sweaty palms around it and yanked. It refused to turn. *The bastards have locked me in from the outside.*

A skeletal figure stepped out into the outside light shining through the door's peephole. His greasy slicked back hair and pale eyes were barely visible in the dim room.

"Now there is no need for that, Ms. Iris Clarks. My apologies. I didn't intend to scare you. I thought you'd be used to people showing up in the shadows after all the time you've spent in the dark."

"G-get ou-out," I said, struggling to get the words out.

"I guess you are right, I should get to the point of my visit. I'm Detective Eckleburg, the head detective for The Optics. I'm sure you've heard of them. In light of some recent controversy on Beta, it has come to our attention that you are using our leniency on light as a means to hide something. I think it's absurd that after all this country has done for you, you still won't abide by the rules," he said, looking at me with disgust in his eyes.

"If anything it was The Inspection that prompted people to act out. Who wants to be a part of a country that doesn't even trust them?" I snarled at Detective Eckleburg, anger replacing my fear.

"Rebelling against me won't help your case. As of now, you are on strict orders to keep your lights on at all times, or else you will be arrested. We have not found any incriminating evidence yet, but you will be under close surveillance for the next couple of weeks."

And just like that, Detective Eckleburg crossed the room to the door, made a series of knocks, and was let out by none other than red baseball cap guy, who smirked at me before closing the door.

I heaved a sigh of relief and chuckled to myself. *Good thing the cameras didn't reach my fridge in the far corner of the kitchen. Then all my exits would really be blocked.* I strode to the magnet covered fridge, and opened the door. Then I slowly opened the false back. I had to hurry, people were counting on me to get them out of this horrible country.