

## Alone Together

Tragedy forces a young woman to face her past, and gives her a chance for a new future.

He didn't ride his motorcycle as much as wear it, pulling the bike down and blazing through corners four times faster than the signs recommended. A twist of the throttle rolled him out of a turn and into a long straight section of road. He poured on the power, not seeing the speedometer count up at a frantic pace, his expression hidden by a dark helmet.

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The doorbell rang. Mindi marked her place in the book before getting up. A thick, oversized envelope leaned against her door, the only sign anyone had been there.

Tears smudged the hand-written cover letter. They might have been real, or they might have been a dramatic touch. It really didn't matter.

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Keisha was putting on a dancing exhibition, and the crowd was going wild. The laws of physics demanded that parts had already fallen out of the skimpy club dress she wore, but physics didn't apply to her. Once she *had* let some extra skin show; ever since they lined up to watch, hoping it would happen again.

She had gone to Meridian to forget, to pretend nothing had happened. After eighteen hours, stopping only to meet the demands of biology, she was exhausted. Maybe now she could sleep.

An image appeared in mid-air to her right; the video doorbell announcing a visitor. The distraction was welcome. The reminder of her brother, near death after his motorcycle accident, was not. She made her apologies and left the dance floor.

Keisha removed her virtual reality headset and stood up, a little unsteady after such a long session. Compared to the glittering world of Meridian her apartment was a grey prison, dark and painfully silent. It always took a few minutes to re-orient herself to the real world. Her back ached and her eyes burned; it was the price she paid to escape.

"I'm Mindi," the woman said as Keisha opened the door. "We spoke on the phone." She was medium height, short hair, piercing eyes, with a body and features that gave Keisha a momentary pang of jealousy.

"Yeah," Keisha mumbled, still a little disoriented. "Sorry...come in."

Mindi followed her into a miniature one-room apartment, smaller than her closet. There were no windows and only the glow of a computer to see by.

Keisha turned on a light, and Mindi could tell she spent most of her time alone. A vanishingly thin night shirt left little to the imagination, highlighting Keisha's perfectly curved figure, but she was several hours of sleep away from beautiful. There was something about her Mindi liked immediately.

"Sorry," Keisha repeated, pulling on a robe. She put drops into her tired eyes. "I'm not used to company and it's been a rough couple days. You're a...?"

"Dialectic. I speak for those who cannot speak for themselves."

“That wasn’t helpful,” Keisha grinned. “Coffee?”

“Please! Black.” Mindi paused while Keisha poured two cups. “Technology has disconnected us. We might be together, but we separate ourselves with screens, locked in our own worlds. Unfortunately we can lose someone close, only to realize we never knew them. That’s where I come in.”

“So you’re a private investigator?”

“In a sense. My goal is to view the world through the window of *their* experience, so I can speak with their voice and help others understand them.”

Keisha shrugged. “What makes you think we don’t understand him?”

“Your parents...”

“Are wasting money. There’s nothing about him I don’t already know.”

“Then you’re just the person I need to talk to.”

“He might...he could still recover,” Keisha said. Mindi held her gaze, and Keisha looked away. “I’m...sorry, but this isn’t a good time,” she sighed.

“Maybe a café? Tomorrow? I’m buying.”

“Yeah.” Keisha needed the break. “Yeah...I’d like that.”

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“Meridian is a virtual world, and I’m a Guide,” Keisha said. “Part customer support, part cruise director. We’re really there to keep users engaged,” She grinned. “Most Guides are female, the best are really women.”

Mindi smiled at the excitement on her face. “What does a Guide’s day look like?”

Teaching new people how to play, staging events, taking users on tours of paid content.” She smirked. “I get a commission if they buy the module, so I like doing that.”

“You get paid for this?”

“Yeah, a little.”

“And Guides have full access?”

“Most *don’t* unless they buy it, but I do.” She looked away, becoming serious. “My brother was...he’s a vice-president now.” She closed her eyes, suddenly remembering why they were there. “I thought you wanted to know about him?” she said quietly.

“Meridian is his life, and you’re an expert,” Mindi said smoothly. “He arranged your access?”

Keisha nodded. “Everything. Even areas in development, new technologies like my special headset, in-game credit, custom perks...”

“What are those?”

“Extras, like houses, cars, designer clothes, weapons and tech for the people in combat areas, or,” she started blushing. “You...you can...enhance your avatar if you’re old enough. *My* avatar is completely custom, but some of those features can be bought.”

“Using real money, but all for a game?”

“*More* than a game,” Keisha smiled, leaning back in her chair. “The potential that kind of virtual reality provides is...” She waved her cup of coffee, spilling it. “Sorry,” she laughed. “I get a little carried away.”

“That’s okay,” Mindi grinned at her as she wiped coffee off the table.

“The government is sponsoring modules to get people interested in everything from history to science.”

“I read something about that.”

“I’ve been to Nero’s Rome, toured the Forbidden City during the Ming dynasty, watched the construction of the Great Pyramid, even walked around the Apollo landing sites!”

“It’s an illusion,” Mindi said. “You’re seeing someone’s interpretation.”

Keisha shrugged. “It’s immersive and educational, with AI backed characters. I’ve talked to Toscanelli and Atahualpa. Studied with Fermi, attended lectures by Aristotle!”

“Do you ever get out and meet people?”

“I go on Meridian dates with users pretty often,” Keisha smiled. “I’m very...popular.”

“A game date? Alone in your apartment?”

“Sometimes it gets a little...we...I suppose we *are* alone, but we’re alone together, and...” She stopped, embarrassed and blushing.

“Do you go on real dates?”

Keisha saw where this was going. “Are you hitting on me?” she tilted her head, smiling unconsciously.

“Since you *asked*, my place? It’s bigger than yours; I have tables and chairs!” Mindi returned the smile. “Dinner, drinks, conversation, card games?”

“I’ve never *seen* cards! Will you teach me how to play?”

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“How is it you know more about card games and books than something like Meridian? Keisha was starting to get good at cribbage.

Mindi snorted. “I grew up in a camp, basically, out in the middle of nowhere. No computers, no internet, no television, not even a phone, but one cabin was completely full of every book you can imagine.”

“Yuck!” Keisha grinned at her.

“My escape was reading, entertainment was board games or cards, adventure was playing in the forest with the other kids or climbing hills, pretending to explore Mars.”

“I’ve been there,” Keisha said absently, hiding a smile. “They’re building a base, but don’t tell anyone. It’s still a secret!”

“We thought life should be simpler.” Mindi paused. “It *was* a good life, but the government classified not having a computer as abuse and took me away.”

“How old were you?” Keisha asked.

“Sixteen. I aced all the placement tests; my school was the world and everyone was a ‘teacher’,” Mindi sighed. “But they put me in foster care, surrounded by all the technology I never had. I *hated* it.”

“The first toy I can remember was a tablet,” Keisha said. “I live my life in Meridian; I’m well known there, but what I’m *really* famous for is dancing!”

“Can you show me?”

“Here?” Keisha laughed. “I can’t dance in the real world; I’d just embarrass myself!”

“Come on,” Mindi put her cards down and stood up. She was losing anyway. “I’ll teach you!”

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It was late, and they lay together, half asleep. “Keish...” Mindi said.

“Quiche?” Keisha said with a laugh. “You’ve turned me into a breakfast dish?”

Mindi smiled sleepily. “I’d eat you for breakfast.”

“That can be arranged.” Keisha chuckled, then became serious. “Did the government *really* think growing up without a computer was abuse, or was there more to it?”

Mindi didn’t answer right away. “There was more,” she said, barely a whisper.

“He isn’t really my brother,” Keisha said after a moment. “My mom married his dad when I was fourteen.”

“Getting to know a new sibling can be difficult,” Mindi said from experience.

“He was *really* cute, but naive. I was...I was more...advanced, in a lot of ways.”

“Were you close back then?”

“We...it got...complicated. He was a crazy genius. I couldn’t relate to him, and we drifted apart.”

“You reconnected.”

“Yeah,” Keisha said. “I discovered Meridian, but the free version is boring. They do that on purpose.” She paused. “When I found out he was a developer I messaged him.”

Mindi let the silence continue. “He...I...I convinced him to help me,” Keisha said.

“It sounds like your relationship is still complicated. Will this affect you in the game?”

“Yeah,” Keisha sighed. “I don’t know what will happen.” Tears fell from Kesha’s eyes. “I wish...I wish I had done everything different,” she whispered. “You can’t imagine how much I screwed up.”

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“Did he ever talk about a girlfriend?” Mindi asked.

Keisha shrugged as they counted out their cards. “We didn’t discuss personal stuff.”

“What *did* you talk about?” Mindi showed Keisha several points in her hand that she had missed.

“He...he tried...he always wanted to chat, but I was only interested in the game.” Keisha took a breath and changed the subject. “We’re going to take him off life support.”

Mindi set the cards down and hugged her.

Dad signed the papers this morning. The doctors say he will save four lives as a donor, and help a dozen more. At least it’s something.”

“When?”

“They’re doing an honor walk tonight,” Keisha wiped away tears.”

“I’ll go with you if you want.”

“I was hoping you’d ask.” Keisha buried her face in Mindi’s shoulder.

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Meridian has lost some of its charm; she had to use her old headset, the players seemed whiny, and what they *really* wanted was so blatantly obvious Kesha had to remind herself she was being paid. That made it worse, and other, more pejorative job titles floated in her mind.

The notice hadn’t helped. They were effusive about her contributions, but they cut her access and took her limitless credit away forever.

What shook her was last paragraph; the one demanding the immediate return of her ‘stolen’ prototype headset, ending with a threat of arrest and criminal prosecution if she showed it to *anyone*. Her world was closing in; even Meridian began to feel like a prison.

The door chimed and she visibly jumped; he was muscular and good looking, but the uniform left butterflies in her stomach. She dropped out of Meridian and nervously opened the door.

“I’m Officer Chris Mikolajczak with the State Patrol; I’ve been investigating your brother’s accident. Can we talk?”

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The doorbell rang, again and again, incessantly demanding attention. Mindi set her book down.

“Why did he kill himself?” Keisha’s eyes were bloodshot from crying.

“I think you already know,” Mindi said, letting her in and closing the door.

“I didn’t...it wasn’t supposed to *mean* anything!” she said, hyperventilating.

“For you, maybe,” Mindi tried to hold her, but Keisha pushed her away. “He was extremely gifted, but that came with a price,” Mindi said gently. “He never understood; you became an obsession.”

Keisha paced the floor. “He was doing much better!”

“He moved on; then you came back. He watched your on-line flirting, your ‘dates’.”

Keisha stopped, and the blood drained out of her face. “I killed him.” She was deceptively calm.

“No! Keisha!” Mindi moved toward her, but Keisha stepped back.

“I wanted to play...it was all about me...I didn’t realize...” She looked up at Mindi with haunted eyes. “He left everything to me. I *murdered* him, and he gave it all to me. He said he loved me, and everyone assumed...”

“*Keisha!*” Mindi desperately tried to break her train of thought.

“*Please* don’t tell our parents!” she begged. “If they knew... What I did, what happened. They would *hate* me! I’ll do whatever you want. I’ll give you *anything*. *Please...*”

“I have a duty.”

“You’ll tear my family apart!” Keisha cried.

“Your parents didn’t hire me, Keisha, *he* did. He sent a package. *I* am his suicide note.”

“You...you *knew*?” Keisha whispered in anguish. “You knew *everything*, even before you called me?”

“There is so much that makes us human, and your view...”

“So...so I was...I was *nothing* to you? Just a...a...”

“Keisha, I *love* you!” Mindi fought back tears, reaching out to her.

“No! You *pretended!* You *used* me! You’re nothing but a...a *whore*, and I *hate* you! I hope you burn in Hell *forever!*”

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The auditorium was full; his parents sat in the front row. They had worked with the donation agency to invite the recipients, a small comfort provided by knowing their son lived on in others. Family and friends had gathered, some in support, others in curiosity, wondering what this was about.

Keisha wasn’t there, and Mindi tried without success to pretend her heart wasn’t broken. She had not slept at all, torn by the decisions she had to make. In the end, her duty was clear.

“Today I speak for Edward Dijkstra,” She began in a formal tone.

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Mindi sat alone in the room, worrying. Nobody had heard from Keisha in days.

The doorbell rang, and Mindi jumped up to answer it.

“Why did he do it?” Keisha asked.

“He believed his feelings were love,” Mindi fought to stay calm.

Keisha showed no sign of hearing. “Why didn’t you tell them?”

“Because *I* love you.” Mindi pulled her into the room. “Where have you been? Everyone is worried sick.”

“I quit my job, canceled my account. I’m not a Guide anymore. I’ll never go back.” Keisha’s voice was wooden, unfeeling.

“He forgave you, Keisha. Now you need to forgive yourself.”

“How?” Her voice cracked and tears flowed.

“Good or bad, he made his own decisions,” Mindi said softly. “You can’t carry this. You *have* to let it go.”

Keisha’s shoulders slumped. Mindi supported her, guiding her to the couch.

“How?” Keisha asked again. “How do I live knowing what I’ve done?”

“Let me help you,” Mindi said, pleading.

“After all of this, the things I’ve said? How can you forgive me?”

“You were forgiven before you finished saying it,” Mindi let out a breath.

“I’ve been hiding so long...I don’t know how to live in the real world anymore,” Keisha said softly.

Mindi smiled. “It’s just a game, like Meridian, with different rules.”

“Will you teach me how to play?” For the first time in days Keisha smiled.

“I was hoping you’d ask.”