

Sparks

Jae



Chapter 1

Willow released her stranglehold on the strap of her overstuffed purse, planted both hands on her hips, and rolled her shoulders back.

Several pedestrians slipped past and eyed her as if she were on drugs.

What? Had they never heard of the Wonder Woman pose? It was supposed to boost confidence—or so her sister said. But as Willow stared up at the sleek glass-and-steel high-rise building that housed Kudos Entertainment Inc., she had to admit it wasn't working.

Come on! New city, new job, new me. It'll be great! This was her chance to finally outrun the reputation she'd earned back home, and she was determined not to mess it up.

Right on cue, the infamous Portland drizzle started as she crossed the street.

She smoothed her pencil skirt, adjusted her blazer, and pulled open the glass doors at Kudos's main entrance.

The echo of her sensible flats on the polished travertine floor sounded way too loud as she crossed the lobby.

A crimson couch stretched along one white marble wall, flanked by ferns in large stone troughs. Somewhere in the background, a gurgling fountain drowned out the sound of the rain on the high glass roof.

A young woman with neatly pinned-up, auburn hair looked up from behind the reception desk.

Willow forced a friendly smile. "Good morning. I'm Willow Greene, the new operations coordinator."

"Good morning and welcome to Kudos." The receptionist tapped a few keys, then opened a drawer and pulled out an ID badge on a red-and-blue lanyard. "Here's your temporary badge. HR will take your photo and set you up with a permanent one later today."

She held it out to Willow, who took it, careful not to let their fingers brush. "Thank you."

"Your desk is on the—"

Approaching footsteps cut her off. A woman in her sixties walked toward them from the bank of elevators, her orthopedic shoes squeaking on the floor. "Ah, perfect timing. You must be my replacement. I'm Barbara Peisner, but please call me Barb." Her silver bob swayed as she came to a stop in front of Willow and held out her hand with a warm smile.

Willow discreetly brushed her fingers over a metal brochure stand holding glossy pamphlets that showed off the company's latest toy products. It was an ingrained habit by now—one that she hoped no one would notice. She shook Barb's hand and returned her smile. "Nice to meet you. Thanks so much for coming down to get me."

Barb chuckled. "Now that they've finally hired my replacement, I didn't want to risk losing you in the maze of offices. My husband already booked us a cruise for January, and it's nonrefundable."

"Please tell him he has nothing to worry about. The trip is safe. I look forward to working here." Willow nodded at the receptionist before following her new colleague to the elevator.

Barb gestured for Willow to enter first, then pushed the button for the thirteenth floor.

Thirteen. Good thing Willow wasn't superstitious. At least not much. She resisted the urge to bob up and down on the balls of her feet as the elevator began to climb.

"I hope you had a hearty breakfast. You're going to need it," Barb said with an apologetic smile. "We usually put new hires through a longer orientation, but the months before Christmas are our busiest season, and I'll retire at the end of November, so we'll have to throw you into the deep end."

Willow struggled not to gulp audibly. It wasn't the workload that scared her, though.

Her frown must have slipped through her professional poker face because Barb patted her arm. "Don't worry. I'll be around for the next two months to show you the ropes."

That was exactly what had Willow so worried. Barb would keep a close eye on her. If Willow's string of tech disasters started again, Barb would notice.

“Don’t let Celeste, our operations manager, intimidate you,” Barb continued. “She’s intense, but not unreasonable. She just values efficiency. If you work hard, you’ll be fine.”

“No problem.” Willow’s work ethic wasn’t what had gotten her fired from her last job. “I’m a quick study and pretty good at adapting. Just point me where you need me, and I’ll do my best.”

The elevator dinged, and the doors swished open on the thirteenth floor.

Willow touched the cool metal as she followed her out.

“This is us—the operations department.” Barb swept her hand toward a frosted glass door with a card reader and stepped aside. “Go ahead and use your badge.”

Willow tightened her grip on the ID card and tapped it against the door’s sensor. *Please work, please work, please work.*

The piece of technology chose to establish the kind of relationship they would have by flashing a mocking red light.

Not now. She tried again.

Nothing. The door refused to open.

The lines on Barb’s forehead deepened. “They gave you one of those temporary badges, right? Maybe it hasn’t been activated in the system yet. May I?”

Willow handed over her badge and took a discreet step back.

Barb tapped it firmly against the reader.

The light flashed green, and the door unlocked with a soft beep.

“There we go,” Barb said with a satisfied nod. “It’s activated after all.”

Willow inched forward again. “Sorry. Looks like my hands aren’t as steady as I thought. I probably didn’t tap it right.” She gave Barb a tremulous smile.

Barb laughed. “Don’t worry. First-day jitters get the best of all of us. I accidentally locked myself in the supply closet my first week here. Thought I’d have to live off printer paper and mints until someone rescued me.” She handed the badge back and swept her arm in invitation. “Come on in.”

As she followed Barb in, Willow shot the card reader a quick glare before putting on her game face.

The operations department seemed to take up most of the thirteenth floor.

Even this early in the morning, the spacious open-plan area was already buzzing with activity. The sounds of low voices, the clacking of keyboards, and the soft creak of a desk chair drifted over from a cluster of cubicles.

Floor-to-ceiling windows lined the outer wall, giving Willow a glimpse of a tree-lined street, the MAX tracks curving past lower office buildings, and the blurred green of a small park through the rain-streaked glass. Another wall held a row of whiteboards displaying shipment timelines and inventory graphs. Someone had taped a pink sticky note next to the word *back order* and scribbled *Waiting for a miracle* on it.

The office smelled faintly of dry-erase markers and freshly brewed coffee.

Several employees peeked over their low cubicle dividers to catch a glimpse of the newbie and offer her friendly smiles.

Barb introduced them, and Willow tried her best to keep up with all the new names and faces.

Just when Willow thought she had finally met everyone, a woman in her mid-forties emerged from a larger cubicle in the center of the room, with a frosted glass panel instead of a gray divider. The chatter in the office seemed to dim as she headed directly for Willow.

She carried herself with calm authority, her posture ramrod straight. Her dark hair was swept into an immaculate low bun, not a strand out of place. No wrinkle dared to form on her crisp white blouse or her tailored navy-blue slacks. A faint line was edged between her elegant brows, as if her mind was always in motion, assessing and optimizing everything. “You must be Willow. Celeste Covey—operations manager. Welcome to Kudos Entertainment.” Her voice was clipped but not cold.

Willow would have guessed the woman to be her direct supervisor, even before she had introduced herself. She had expected to meet her during her job interview, but Celeste had been tied up in meetings that day. “Thank you. I’m looking forward to being part of the team.” She quickly brushed her fingers against the metal handle of a filing cabinet before shaking Celeste’s hand.

“Excellent.” Celeste gave a curt nod in Barb’s direction. “Barbara will show you the ropes. I know you two will have a lot of ground to cover, but I believe you’ll find our systems straightforward and our team highly capable. If anything comes up or if you have questions Barbara can’t answer, my door is always open. Metaphorically speaking, of course.” A

corner of her mouth lifted almost imperceptibly as she gestured at her doorless cubicle.

The unexpected hint of humor eased Willow's tension. "I'll knock if I need anything. Thank you."

"Good." With that, Celeste returned to her sleek, clutter-free desk.

Barb didn't give her the time to watch Celeste leave. She lightly gripped Willow's elbow and showed her where to find the essentials: the copier, the supply closet, and, most importantly, the coffee. Finally, Barb ended the tour at her own desk, near the back of the bullpen.

Unlike Celeste's neat setup, Barb's workstation was full of personality. It held family photos, a huge mug with the words *Best Operations Coordinator Ever* on it, one of Kudos's small robot toys, and a rotating calendar that still read *September* even though it was the first of October.

"Your desk is right here." Barb pointed at the workspace next to her own, separated only by a low partition.

The bare desk held not one but two monitors. Willow wasn't yet sure if the extra device was a good or a bad thing. The computer tower sat on the floor, which she knew was a big no-no since it made the machine more vulnerable to accidental kicks, spills, dust, and static electricity from the carpet. But she bit her lip and didn't say anything. If the system malfunctioned, at least they might blame the tower's placement, not her.

Barb pulled out the desk chair for her. "Let's get you logged in. I'll walk you through SAP, Teams, Asana, and all the other fun tools. Just tell me whenever your head feels like it's going to explode and you need a break."

Willow nodded. She already knew her biggest challenge wouldn't be mastering the software. It would be making it through the day without sparks, smoke, or flashing error messages.



Willow glanced at the big clock above the filing cabinet. *Yes!* Just five more minutes and she would have made it through her first day at Kudos without the slightest hitch.

Barb had left half an hour ago for a doctor's appointment, leaving Willow to play around in the Sandbox, Kudos's test environment that was supposed to familiarize newbies with their demand-planning software.

It was kind of fun to enter fictional demand spikes for the new Sparkle Pups line just to see how the system would reallocate inventory. She

typed 2,500 *units* into the input field and prayed she wasn't accidentally rerouting an actual shipment to Siberia or something. To be on the safe side, she typed in: *Test scenario only—please ignore!*

The keyboard made clicking sounds, but the letters took forever to show up on the screen. Then they stopped appearing altogether.

"Oh, come on. Don't do this to me," Willow muttered, gently shaking the keyboard. "Just a few more minutes."

She typed a row of x's, tapping lightly, then harder.

Nothing.

She pressed backspace.

Still no response from the stubborn piece of equipment.

Willow switched the dongle of her wireless keyboard to a different USB port and held her breath as she typed a few letters.

The keystrokes didn't register.

Not about to give up, Willow slid open the drawer next to her. As soon as Barb had left, she had filled it with an assortment of spare batteries she had carried in her purse.

But replacing the batteries didn't help either.

Maybe she could log out of the Sandbox, restart her computer, and solve the problem without anyone noticing. She didn't want to ask for help and risk getting the same kind of reputation she'd had at her old company.

"Problem?" a clipped voice asked before Willow could even touch the mouse.

Willow jumped and swiveled her head around.

Celeste Covey stood next to her desk, holding a folder. She ran a sharp, assessing look over Willow.

For a moment, Willow considered pretending all was fine, but her new boss didn't seem to miss much. If she caught Willow in a lie on her first day, their working relationship wouldn't be off to a good start.

"Just my keyboard." Willow tried to keep her voice light. "Apparently, it couldn't handle all the excitement and stopped working."

"Submit a ticket to IT," Celeste replied. "They usually send someone up right away."

"That's not necessary," Willow said quickly. "I'm pretty good at fixing—"

Celeste lifted her folder, cutting her off. "Nonsense. Trying to fix a technical problem yourself when we have a perfectly capable IT department is an inefficient use of resources."

Barb had warned her that their manager hated inefficiency, so Willow had to try a different tactic. "I'd love to submit a ticket, but...well...no keyboard." She waved her hand at the useless device.

"The on-screen keyboard should still work," Celeste replied without missing a beat. "Use that to fill out the help desk form."

Damn. Her old boss had been clueless when it came to technology, but she wouldn't be able to fool this one. Willow nodded and forced a small smile. "Good idea. I'll do that."

Celeste tucked the folder under her arm and headed back to her desk, but Willow had a feeling she'd keep an eye on her.

Now she had no other choice. She had to do the one thing that she'd hoped to avoid as long as possible: make the acquaintance of Kudos's IT support.

Chapter 2

Scottie added a quick note to the ticket she'd just resolved, documenting the steps she'd taken, then leaned back and stretched with a groan.

The help desk had finally quieted down. The steady stream of incoming tickets had trailed off, the phone had stopped ringing, and people no longer dropped by for a "quick question" that was never actually quick.

Maybe they could get out of here on time for a change. She glanced left and right to see if her colleagues needed help wrapping up their own work.

To her left, Gordon was speaking softly into his headset, walking someone through what sounded like a password reset. He hated leaving his desk and interacting with people face-to-face, but he had the patience of a saint when handling problems remotely.

His desk was as neat as always, not a cord out of place, and his leather briefcase sat packed up next to him. He looked like a banker ready to head home rather than an IT support specialist.

To her right, Mateo made entries in his daily log, his desk a study in contrast. A chaotic array of sticky notes was taped along both of his monitors, and several empty coffee cups vied for space with a Bluetooth adapter still in its package, a stack of service ticket printouts, and a clipboard buried beneath it all.

Scottie's own desk, sandwiched between theirs, was a cheerful compromise. Her Captain Janeway and Seven of Nine rubber ducks flanked a bottle of screen cleaner, and her rainbow-backlit keyboard added a splash of color to the otherwise black equipment.

The soft ping of a new ticket notification interrupted their momentary peace.

Mateo groaned. "Five minutes to five. We'll never get out of here on time."

Gordon wrapped up his call, hung his headset on its stand, and ran a hand through his neatly parted graying hair. "Let me guess... Someone opened a phishing email despite our training last month?"

"My money is on Mr. Sorensen having accidentally deleted all his desktop shortcuts...again." Mateo fished a wrinkled ten-dollar bill from his back pocket and slapped it on Scottie's desk. "Scottie?"

"Someone can't access the shared drive." Scottie slid ten bucks on top of Mateo's bill.

Wordlessly, Gordon followed suit.

Scottie leaned forward and glanced at one of her monitors, which always showed the queue of open tickets.

Only one remained.

"Keyboard issues," Scottie announced.

They each withdrew their money from the pile and pocketed it.

Mateo laughed. "Maybe they can't find the *any* key."

They all chuckled. It wouldn't be the first time someone took the message *Press any key to continue* literally and searched their keyboard for a key labeled *any*.

Scottie took a closer look at the ticket to see who had submitted it. "Willow Greene, Operations."

"Is she new?" Mateo asked.

"Yeah," Scottie said. "Must be the new operations coordinator."

"They hired someone new?" Gordon asked. "What happened to Barb?"

"She's retiring. You'd know that if you left your desk every now and then—or read the employee newsletter." Scottie nudged him with her elbow.

"At least it's not Mr. Sorensen," Mateo said.

It was an open secret that the company's COO had only gotten the job because he was engaged to their CEO's daughter. He treated every minor computer issue like a full-scale crisis that might plunge the company into ruin. Naturally, he expected IT to drop everything else the moment his name appeared in their ticket queue.

"Thank God," Mateo added. "So, who's going?"

He and Gordon looked at each other. Both were happily married men with families waiting, defying the stereotype of the single IT nerd. Scottie was the only one who'd be going home to an empty apartment. Even after six months of being single, it still felt too quiet.

"I'll take it." Scottie didn't mind staying longer, and she liked interacting with people all over the company.

Mateo playfully clutched his heart. "Our hero." Then he sobered. "You sure?"

"Yeah. Probably a typical newbie problem. Should be a quick fix." Scottie waved toward the door. "You two go home to your wives."

"You need one of those, *mi amiga*."

"Maybe she should start with a girlfriend," Gordon threw in.

Scottie crossed her arms over her chest and gave them a look somewhere between amused and annoyed. "Are you two done discussing my love life?"

"Or lack thereof," Gordon muttered.

"Well, who knows? Maybe our new operations coordinator is cute, single, and just waiting for an IT goddess to reboot her heart." Mateo fluttered his lashes at Scottie.

She threw her Death Star stress ball at him. "No, thanks. I'm still rebooting my own after my big system crash. I'll be in safe mode for a while." She powered down her computer, got up, and grabbed her tool kit and a spare keyboard, just in case. With a cheerful wave, she headed out and called back over her shoulder: "Don't wait up for me, kids!"



When Scottie pulled open the frosted glass door and entered the Operations bullpen, she thought she was prepared for anything: crumbs stuck beneath the keys, a newbie who didn't know a wireless keyboard needed batteries, or someone accidentally hitting caps lock. But she hadn't expected to find the desk next to Barb's workspace empty.

Wasn't this where they had put the new operations coordinator? According to the employee newsletter, Barb would be showing her replacement the ropes, so it seemed like the logical choice.

She looked around.

Half the Operations staff had either already left or was packing up. Of course, Celeste Covey was still working away at her desk, sticking her head out of her cubicle just long enough to steer Scottie in the right direction—toward the empty workspace next to Barb's.

Scottie paused mid-step.

The desk wasn't actually empty.

A pair of long, slender, pantyhose-clad legs and a shapely behind in a pencil skirt were sticking out from under it. Operation's newest employee was on her hands and knees, probably checking the connections.

That was unexpected. Most users just sat there, twiddling their thumbs, while they waited for the cavalry to arrive. This one seemed to be proactive. *Nice*. And so were the lean muscles in her calves.

Jesus, Scottie! Work call, remember? She had no business noticing the woman's calves or any other body part!

Scottie coughed to announce her presence.

A thump and a muffled squeak came from under the desk, then a head of dark-brown, shoulder-length hair appeared. Gracefully, the woman crawled out of the confined space and stood. She unfolded her slim frame to a full five foot nine, the same height as Scottie, which didn't happen very often.

But compared to Scottie, the woman appeared almost delicate, with long limbs and narrow wrists. She looked a few years younger than Scottie, probably in her early thirties. Her cheeks were pink, either from the effort of crawling beneath the desk or the embarrassment of having been caught there. She swept her hair behind both ears, which gave her a studious look, then made sure her pastel-lavender blouse was still tucked in at the waist. A black blazer hung from the back of her chair.

Her outfit wasn't unusual at all. It made her blend right in with the other admin staff, almost like office camouflage. She wasn't wearing jewelry, not even a wristwatch.

And yet something about her made Scottie's gaze want to linger on the new hire. Not because Willow was trying to stand out, but because she clearly wasn't.

She realized she was staring and quickly covered it up by tucking the spare keyboard beneath her left arm and sticking out her hand. "Hi, I'm Scottie from IT."

The woman paused. "Scottie?"

Scottie grinned and shrugged, long since used to that kind of reaction. "What can I say? I'm a Trekkie, and I've always liked fixing things, even as a kid. Plus my last name is Prescott, so the nickname stuck."

"Ah. Willow Greene. No nickname." Her smile was professional and guarded, but her long lashes lent an unexpected softness to the sharp intelligence in her hazel eyes, which peered out from behind glasses with black, rectangular frames. As Willow reached forward with her right hand, she brushed the metal handle of her desk drawer with her left. It looked

like a casual, coincidental touch, but that didn't fit the way she moved—elegant yet precise and contained, as if she was always overly aware of whatever she touched. Her slim fingers wrapped around Scottie's with an unexpected strength and gave a quick shake.

"So..." Scottie cleared her throat. "You're having keyboard issues? What exactly is the problem?"

"My keyboard keeps freezing. At first, it was just lagging, but then it stopped responding entirely. I've tried restarting, checking the cables, plugging it into a different USB port, and even putting in new batteries, but it's still not working." Willow gestured at her desk drawer, which was sitting a few inches ajar—just enough for Scottie to glimpse an impressive assortment of batteries: AA, AAA, C, D, and even different button cell batteries.

Oh wow. Scottie had seen hardware stores that weren't as well-stocked! She let out a low whistle. "Impressive collection!"

Willow nudged the drawer closed as if she hadn't meant for Scottie to see its contents.

"Hey, that's a good thing," Scottie said quickly. She offered a smile, hoping to put her at ease. "I like a woman who's prepared for anything."

Willow's cheeks flushed a deeper pink, but she didn't respond.

Scottie took the hint. Time to be a professional. "So, the keyboard problem... Does it happen in all applications or just in one?"

"I was running some simulations in the Sandbox when it first happened," Willow replied. "But as far as I can tell, it happens everywhere."

"Okay, then let's take a look." Scottie set her tool kit and the spare keyboard down. She rubbed her hands together as if to warm them and gestured at Willow's office chair. "May I?"

"Of course." Willow backed out of the way so Scottie could take a seat.

As Scottie settled in, her gaze flicked down to the computer tower. It rested directly on the carpet, not on an antistatic mat or on a rack beneath the desk, as she had first thought. "Um, your computer sitting on the floor isn't ideal," she said as patiently as possible. "The carpet attracts dust and creates static, especially if the cleaning crew vacuums too close to the computer."

Willow ducked her head. "Sorry. The person who had my job before me must have put it there. Maybe they wanted more desk space."

"Hey, no need to apologize. If anything, it's us who dropped the ball. We should've checked your workstation before you started, but we're one tech short right now, and it's been one of those weeks."

Willow waved a hand. "No worries. We've all had those weeks."

"If you need the space, I can set up a rack beneath the desk for you," Scottie said.

"No, thank you," Willow replied. "That's not necessary. We can just put it on the desk."

"All right. I'll do that in a minute. But let's see if I can find out what's wrong with your keyboard first." Scottie glanced around Willow's workspace, checking for physical damage, spills, or debris that might block the keys. But the desk was clean and nearly empty. The only things that stood out were a paper planner and an old-fashioned Rolodex.

It had been ages since Scottie had seen one of those. Everyone in her orbit relied on digital calendars and contacts synced to the cloud. Was Willow one of those tech-averse people who eyed all electronic devices with suspicion and hardly knew how to send an email?

Maybe the keyboard issues were just plain old user error.

Scottie opened the Notepad app and typed a few lines, then tried the same in the Sandbox and a few other applications.

The letters appeared on-screen without even a hint of lag.

"Hmm, it seems to be behaving for me right now," Scottie said.

"I swear it was completely frozen a minute ago." A hint of defensiveness crept into Willow's tone.

Scottie lifted her hands off the keyboard in a placating gesture. "I believe you. We call it the IT effect—the problem vanishes the moment someone from tech support arrives. Let me check all the usual suspects anyway, just to make sure the issue doesn't reoccur as soon as I leave."

She pulled out her small flashlight to peer under the desk and confirm the Bluetooth dongle was firmly placed in the USB port. Usually, she would have popped open the battery cover to make sure they were inserted correctly, but the keyboard was working, plus she didn't want to make Willow even more defensive by implying she couldn't even put in the batteries the right way.

With practiced ease, she checked the accessibility settings and the keyboard properties. The repeat rate was turned up to maximum, and Sticky Keys and Filter Keys were turned off. *Hm. Not that either.*

Willow stayed back and watched quietly from several steps away, but Scottie was very aware of the woman's gaze following her every movement.

She opened the task manager and looked for any runaway processes that might have consumed excessive resources and bogged down the

system. A few CPU spikes and slightly elevated RAM, but nothing unusual given the Sandbox simulations Willow had been running.

Willow shifted her weight behind her.

Scottie glanced over her shoulder.

Willow was watching her with an expression she couldn't quite read, maybe a mix of patience and resigned dread.

Didn't she believe Scottie could fix her problem? As the only woman in the IT department, Scottie had encountered that lack of trust in her abilities a few times, especially in the beginning, but something told her that wasn't the case now.

Willow was just as mysterious and hard to grasp as the source of the keyboard issues.

"So," Scottie said while she checked for Windows updates, making sure it wasn't outdated software causing problems, "how long have you worked at Kudos? You're a new hire, right?"

"Yes," Willow replied. "Just started today."

Scottie wagged her finger at the keyboard. "And this is the kind of welcome you're giving Willow? Shame on you!"

Over her shoulder, she caught a hint of a smile on Willow's face, but it was gone as quickly as it had appeared.

Scottie opened the device manager and updated the driver manually, not trusting the automatic Windows process to find the newest version for the wireless keyboard. While she shut down the computer, she turned around in the office chair to face Willow. "I couldn't find any obvious cause. Everything seems to be working normally right now, but I went ahead and updated the driver just in case. I'm going to move the tower onto the desk now, then restart it. Sometimes, a fresh start is all it takes to smooth out the glitches."

Something shifted in Willow's expression, but, again, her face was as unreadable as the two monitors, which now went black as the computer powered down.

Scottie got up, crouched, and unplugged the power cord, followed by the other cables. "Did you move here for the job, or are you from around here?" She always chatted with people while she worked. Usually, it put them at ease.

But Willow looked like a prisoner being interrogated. "I moved here a couple of weeks ago." Her voice wasn't unfriendly, just professional, drawing a clear line.

"Oh, cool. How do you find Portland so far?"

"Rainy," Willow replied with the tiniest hint of a grin.

Scottie laughed. "No one has ever moved here for the weather; that's for sure. But I promise Portland has its perks." Carefully, she slid the computer out from under the desk, lifted it up, and placed it next to the monitors, at a safe distance from the edge. "If you ever need a local tour guide to show you the best food carts, the weirdest festivals, and all the other insider spots, let me know."

"Thanks. That's very generous of you," Willow said, but Scottie had a feeling she wouldn't take her up on the offer.

One by one, she reconnected the cables, then pressed the power button. When the login screen came up, she gestured toward the desk chair. "Let's see if it'll behave for you now. Go ahead and try to log in."

Gingerly, Willow took a seat and typed in her password.

Each key responded without the slightest lag.

Scottie grinned. "Looks like you're all set. But keep an eye on it, and if it starts going rogue again, file a ticket, and I'll hurry to the rescue."

Willow nodded. "Thank you. And I'm really sorry for keeping you so long. It's probably past your quitting time."

Scottie waved her off. "No worries. After hours, when it's quieter, is often the best time to fix stuff. Have a great rest of the day."

"You too."

Scottie took her tool kit and the spare keyboard and walked to the door. After a few steps, she turned back around.

Willow had taken her hands off the keyboard and was watching her leave.

"Welcome to Kudos, by the way," Scottie called back to her.

"Thank you," Willow replied softly.

With a nod, Scottie backed through the glass door, turned, and walked to the elevator.

The keyboard was working. Case closed. Normally, she wouldn't keep thinking about such a routine problem once she walked away. But somehow, she had a feeling she hadn't seen the last of Willow Greene.

Chapter 3

The rumble of the MAX train had long since faded behind Willow by the time she turned onto her sister's street.

Well, it was her street now too, but she hadn't quite gotten used to thinking of it as home yet. The sight of the house still made her chuckle.

Fiona's quirky English cottage looked like something from a fairy tale. Its bold shade of purple made it stand out between the ordinary homes as much as Fiona did among her neighbors. Twin dormer windows with a white trim peeked out from a sharply pitched roof like two raised eyebrows.

The weathered wooden fence that separated the yard from the sidewalk was painted a faded burgundy red. A climbing rose vine spilled through the slats and over the top, with a few stubborn late blooms still clinging on.

Willow tucked her chin into the collar of her jacket against the drizzle as she climbed the few steps to the arched entryway and the white front door beyond. She dug her keys out of her purse and let herself in.

The scents of linseed oil from Fiona's oil paints, melted cheese, and dried lavender greeted her, but the house was unusually quiet.

"Fiona?" she called. "You home?"

"In here!" Fiona replied from the living room.

Willow took off her jacket and shoes by the door. Not that Fiona required it. Her sister had never mentioned a single house rule, other than: "Make yourself at home."

In her pantyhose-clad feet, Willow padded through the narrow hallway and past two well-loved armchairs in the living room.

Fiona was sprawled on the large couch, a chipped mug in one hand and a paperback balanced on her belly. She had her feet up on the coffee table, stretching them toward the electric fireplace, so her mismatched

socks were on full display. “Hey, you’re back! How was it?” She marked her page by folding down a corner—which made Willow wince—flung the book aside, and jumped up.

Sugar, one of the cats, lifted her head and blinked sleepily, while Spice—who’d been curled up on Fiona’s other side—let out an annoyed hiss at the interruption.

“Did you survive day one in the corporate jungle?” Fiona asked.

Willow sighed and dropped her purse next to the couch. “Barely.”

“Come on. Sit and tell me everything!” Fiona grabbed her arm and dragged her around the coffee table.

Willow sank onto the sofa next to her. “It wasn’t bad. Everyone seemed nice, especially Barb. She’ll be there for the next two months to show me the ropes. The work itself seems really interesting.”

“Ooh, you mean there are”—Fiona lowered her voice as if whispering dirty little secrets—“color-coded spreadsheets, geeky checklists, and inventory forms?”

Willow chuckled. “Of course there are. But mostly, it involves juggling a lot of moving parts and putting them all together to keep everything running like a well-oiled machine. It’s a challenge, but I think I’ll enjoy it.”

Fiona studied her. “But?”

Her sister knew her too well. Willow hesitated, not sure she wanted to talk about it.

“There is a but, isn’t there? Is your boss an ass?”

“No, she’s all right, I think,” Willow replied. “Well, the jury’s still out on my boss’s boss, our COO. I haven’t met him yet, but our manager seems okay. Barb says she just values efficiency.”

“If it’s not your bosses, what is it, then?”

Willow grabbed the half-eaten slice of pizza from Fiona’s plate on the coffee table and opened her mouth to take a bite.

Fiona snatched it away and pushed the plate out of reach. “There’s more in the oven for you, but you’re not getting it until you spill. What happened?”

Willow sighed. “The usual.”

“Oh no! Tech glitch?”

Willow’s lips compressed into a thin line. She nodded. “It all went well until it was almost time to go home. The evil devices lulled me into a false sense of security, and just when I thought I had made it through the day without an incident...bam, my keyboard stopped working and I had to submit a ticket to IT.”

"That sucks." Fiona wrapped one arm around her and gently pulled Willow's head onto her soft yet solid shoulder.

Willow tensed for a second, bracing for the familiar zap, but it never came. *Phew*. Maybe she was starting to feel at home in her sister's house after all. The more relaxed she felt, the less often the static shocks happened. Plus it helped that Fiona's house—unlike the Operations bullpen—didn't have carpet. She exhaled and sank against Fiona.

"Could the IT guy fix it for you?" her sister asked.

"It wasn't a guy. It was a woman."

Fiona let go of Willow to clap her hands together. "Ooh, a woman with a tool belt! Isn't that like lesbian catnip?"

Willow shrugged. "I guess."

"So she wasn't attractive?"

How had this gone from being about her sucky day and her traitorous keyboard to being about Scottie's attractiveness? Willow dug her elbow into her sister's side. "She didn't even have a tool belt, just a tool kit."

"I notice you didn't say she wasn't attractive." Fiona flashed her a sly grin.

Okay, Willow had to admit Scottie hadn't been unattractive. She had that capable soft butch thing going, with blonde hair that fell across her broad, open face. It wasn't exactly shaggy, but it curled around her strong jaw with a slight wave as if overdue for a trim. Some people, Willow possibly included, might say it gave her an effortless charm. Her brown eyes had been kind, not judging Willow for even a second, and they had crinkled at the corners whenever she'd smiled—which had been a lot. And, yes, Willow had noticed how well her black chinos fit when Scottie had bent to check out the cables beneath her desk, emphasizing strong thighs and wide hips that tapered into a narrow waist.

"I wouldn't know," Willow said, trying for her most convincing poker face. "I was too focused on my keyboard issues to notice."

"Right," Fiona drawled.

"No, really. My boss's cubicle is in the same bullpen, and I was too busy trying to appear normal. Not that I succeeded." Willow rubbed her face with both hands. "Scottie probably thought I was weird. I'm pretty sure she caught me touching the desk drawer before I shook her hand so I wouldn't zap her."

"Scottie?" Fiona cocked her head. "Is that your boss?"

"No, the woman from IT."

Fiona shoved the rest of the pizza into her mouth and chewed slowly. "So if she saw that," she said once she'd swallowed, "why didn't you tell her the truth?"

Willow groaned. "How many times do we have to have this conversation?"

"I just don't get why you think you've got to keep this a secret at all costs. I know it's what Mom and Dad drilled into you, but you're an adult now. You get to make your own decisions."

Willow pinched the bridge of her nose. "I did make my own decision—the decision to keep it quiet, not tell everyone and their dog."

"I'm not saying rent out a billboard, but why not reveal what's really going on with you to a few select people?" Fiona asked. "Wouldn't it make your life easier if you didn't constantly have to hide or make up excuses? If you told this Scottie person, maybe she could have helped you."

Willow grabbed one of the fuchsia throw pillows and kneaded it roughly. "What exactly should I have told her, Fi?" There was no scientific explanation she could offer for batteries draining and electronics malfunctioning around her, sometimes without her even touching them—at least nothing that sounded halfway reasonable. "I know you mean well, but telling her wouldn't help. People never believe me. They just think I'm weird."

"Maybe it would be different here. Our slogan is 'Keep Portland weird' after all."

Willow shook her head. "This would be too weird, even for Portland."

"How do you know if you don't give it a chance? You said you want this"—Fiona waved her arm in a gesture that indicated the entire city—"to be a new start, so why not try to make new friends?"

Willow dug her fingers into the pillow until they started to hurt. "And then what? Watch another group of people get fed up and stop inviting me to movie night and any other activities involving tech?"

Been there, done that. She had no desire to repeat that experience. It was easier to keep people at arm's length.

"Please!" Fiona huffed. "Those weren't real friends. They were assholes."

"All of them? Including Mia? I thought you liked her." Willow froze. She hadn't meant to ask that. She had spat out Mia's name in frustration.

Fiona went uncharacteristically still. "Yeah, I did like her. But she was more than a friend to you, wasn't she?" she asked quietly.

Willow's head snapped around. "You knew?"

“Of course I knew! It was painfully obvious that you had the biggest crush on her when you were fifteen.”

Heat surged up Willow’s neck. “Ugh. Was it really? How humiliating!”

“No, it was cute.” Fiona studied her with a soft smile. “I never understood why you two stopped hanging out. I just didn’t want to ask and dig into something painful. Did you confess your feelings, and she couldn’t deal with them?”

Willow picked imaginary lint off the pillow. “No, that wasn’t it.” Back then, she had been pretty shy. She never would have dared to tell Mia, who was everything she wasn’t: cool, confident, popular, and extremely successful at whatever she tried her hand at. “Remember that DSLR camera she took everywhere?”

Fiona nodded.

“It used to be her dad’s before he died. One day, she talked me into cutting school and sitting up on the rooftop, talking and taking goofy snapshots of each other for hours. I thought it was the best day of my life...until I tried to take another picture of her and the camera wasn’t working. It just turned off and never turned back on, no matter what we tried.”

“Shit,” Fiona muttered.

“Yeah. Mia got so upset. She tried to get it repaired, but they couldn’t fix it. I promised to take a summer job and buy her a new camera, but she said it wouldn’t be the same. I tried to explain...told her everything...” The disbelieving expression on Mia’s tear-stained face was burned into her memory forever. “She didn’t believe me. She accused me of making it all up because I was too much of a chicken to admit that I’d dropped the camera when she wasn’t looking. Then she told all our friends that I’d broken her dad’s camera and that I’d tried to cover it up by making up some wild story about a tech curse.”

That was when Willow had stopped trying to explain the way she affected technology.

In the sudden silence, the hum of the oven from the kitchen sounded overly loud.

“I’m so sorry.” Fiona turned on the sofa and pulled Willow into a hug.

Willow sank into her big sister’s embrace, not caring one bit that there might be some not-yet-dry paint splattered over Fiona’s turquoise overalls. Even the smell of turpentine that clung to Fiona was strangely comforting.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me what really happened?” Fiona asked.

Willow shrugged without freeing herself of the embrace. "We weren't exactly close back then. You already resented me enough without me running to you with a sob story about destroying yet another device."

Fiona clutched her fiercely. "Yeah, okay, we weren't as close as we're now. I guess we were too different. But I never resented you."

"Please! *Fiona Aveline Greene! Don't upset your sister; we just replaced the dishwasher!*" Willow imitated her mother's voice. "Don't tell me you didn't resent that!"

Fiona chuckled. "All right. I admit I didn't love that. They tried to lock you away in an ivory tower, and I—"

"Wanted to set out to slay dragons," Willow finished. Even as a child, her sister had always been outgoing and bold and hated any attempt to contain her.

"Maybe not slay dragons, but I wanted to go to summer camp and invite my friends over to play video games, and I hated not being able to do some of that. Always having to be careful. That's just not me."

"I know," Willow said quietly. "I'm sorry."

Fiona nudged her. "Don't apologize for something that isn't your fault. If anyone has to apologize, it's me. For ever making you feel like I resented you. I was only fed up with all the restrictions, never with you."

A lump formed in Willow's throat. She swallowed it down and pulled back a little to grin at Fiona. "Not even when I gave your favorite Barbie a buzz cut?"

Fiona laughed. "Okay, maybe then. I didn't share your fondness for butch Barbies." She pulled Willow back against her. "Thank you for telling me what really happened with Mia."

"You're welcome," Willow murmured against Fiona's shoulder.

They sat in silence for a while, and Willow felt the tension recede from her body. Only then did she realize how anxious she'd been all day. No wonder her keyboard had been acting up! Her effect on electronics always got worse when she was stressed, upset, or experienced any other strong negative emotion.

"By the way, I take it back," Fiona said close to her ear.

"Take what back? Your suggestion for me to make friends and tell people the truth?"

Fiona pulled back but kept her hands on Willow's shoulders. "No. I take back what I said about Mia not being an asshole."

"She's not!" The wave of defensiveness, even after all those years, surprised her. "She was just hurt and didn't understand. It's not her fault."

"I know." Fiona gave a soft squeeze. "But it's not yours either, and I hate seeing you live your life like you're cursed."

The word made Willow flinch. That was exactly how she felt sometimes. But she refused to let it control her life and her emotions any more than it already did. That was why she hadn't walked away from her admin job years ago, even though it required constant interaction with computers, printers, and software. "I'm not. I just need to make it through the first week and establish a new routine at work. Once things settle down and I'm less stressed, my devices will stop glitching all the time."

"Right." A grin returned to Fiona's face. "And until then, you can always call your superheroine with the tool kit to come to your rescue."

Willow smacked her with the pillow. "Shut up and go get my pizza."

"Me? Do I look like a waitress?"

"You look like a woman who wouldn't want her oven to spontaneously combust when I open it."

Fiona gave her a playful glare but got up and padded over to the kitchen, both cats in tow.

Willow watched her with a smile. If she was technologically hexed, she might as well use it to her advantage every now and then.

Chapter 4

A new ticket popped into the queue with a chime.

“Oh, look who it is!” Mateo peered at the notification over the rim of his *IT Ninja* mug. “The new girl strikes again!”

Scottie paused, fingers hovering over her keyboard. Willow had submitted another ticket, just two days after the first one?

“What is it this time?” Gordon asked without looking up from his own work.

“Keyboard issues—again,” Mateo replied. “And now her mouse is acting up too.”

Gordon let out a low whistle. “What is she doing up there? Declaring war on her peripherals?”

Mateo nodded. “I bet it’s user error.”

To be fair, everything pointed in that direction. Willow’s keyboard issues had vanished the moment Scottie had taken a seat at her desk. She’d been able to type without the tiniest hint of a lag, even before she had updated the driver.

It wouldn’t have been the first time a new employee was fumbling with an unfamiliar setup or a technophobe didn’t want to admit that it was them, not the machine, causing the problem.

But Willow hadn’t struck her as clueless. She had tried to fix the problem herself and had taken all the right steps. Even the way she had filled out the help desk form was thorough, well-organized, and intelligent.

Something wasn’t adding up.

“I’ll take this one,” Scottie said before either of her colleagues could suggest a round of rock, paper, scissors to see who had to go.

“Wow.” Mateo reached over and lightly slapped her shoulder. “I didn’t know you were into masochism.”

Scottie flashed him a grin. “What, your mom didn’t tell you?”

Mateo nearly choked on a sip of coffee.

Gordon doubled over laughing. “She didn’t just burn you; she roasted you with a flamethrower!”

“Yeah, yeah.” Glaring, Mateo mopped up the coffee stain on his shirt, then balled up the soaked tissue and threw it at Scottie. “My mother would totally top you.”

Grinning, Scottie batted the damp missile away. “I met her. No doubt she would.” She grabbed her tool kit, slid one of the loaner laptops into her bag, and shouldered it like a medic on a mission.

Of course, her volunteering to take this ticket had nothing to do with being a masochist. She was just curious and wanted to figure out what was really going on...with Willow’s devices, obviously.



This time, the Operations floor was still buzzing with activity when Scottie got out of the elevator and entered the bullpen.

Two employees were moving around color-coded magnets on a whiteboard, discussing a project timeline, and Celeste Covey sat at her desk, phone pressed to her ear. “Frankly, I don’t care about that, Marcus,” Celeste said, her tone even but stern. “We’ve got ten pallets of Sparkle Pups sitting in Newark when they should have been on a truck to Louisville three hours ago!”

Scottie didn’t linger to hear more of the tense conversation. Best to get Willow’s peripherals issues sorted out fast before she ended up in her manager’s line of fire during her first week at Kudos. Scottie’s steps were quiet on the carpet as she crossed toward her, so Willow hadn’t noticed her yet.

This time, she was at her desk, not beneath it. She clutched her mouse and gave it a little shake. Her gaze was locked on the screen as if she was trying to will her devices into obedience.

“Good morning,” Scottie said as she reached her. She waved at Barb, who peeked over her divider, before returning her attention to Willow. “You look like you’re about three seconds away from hurling your mouse out the window.”

Willow looked up. She released the mouse and let her shoulders drop. “No—but only because the windows up here don’t open.”

Scottie chuckled. “Don’t worry. I’m here to help, and I think my methods are more productive than chucking your devices out the window.”

"I'm really sorry to have to bother you again." Willow had averted her gaze.

"Hey, it's all good. This is what I get paid the not-so-big-bucks for." Scottie slid her laptop bag off her shoulder and set it down next to Willow's desk. "So what exactly is the problem? The mouse has joined the keyboard in its rebellion?"

Willow nodded. "The keyboard is up to its old tricks, either lagging or not working at all, and the cursor jumps across the screen, even when I barely move the mouse. It's impossible to click on anything."

"Okay. Let me take a look at your haunted mouse."

Willow winced noticeably.

Scottie paused and studied her. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No, no. It's nothing." Willow got up from her office chair so Scottie could take her place.

Scottie didn't believe her, but she decided not to push it. She took a seat, reached for the mouse, and moved it to the left.

The cursor lurched across the screen like a drunk frog.

She tried to steer it toward a folder, but it overshot its mark and zipped past it.

Definitely not user error.

Scottie glanced over her shoulder at Willow, who seemed almost relieved that Scottie could reproduce the problem this time. "You weren't kidding."

"I tried switching it to one of the USB ports on the back, but it didn't help," Willow said.

Scottie gave her an appreciative nod. "Good thinking." That would have been her next step. "Let's see if it'll behave on the laptop I brought." She connected Willow's mouse and keyboard to the laptop.

Everything worked flawlessly—no hint of a lag, no erratic behavior.

So the peripherals themselves weren't the issue. That meant they were looking at a possible problem with the hardware.

She plugged the keyboard and mouse back in, restarted the computer, and entered the BIOS to see if the peripherals would misbehave even there.

Once the blue-and-gray interface came up, Scottie pressed the down arrow key.

The cursor hesitated for a full second, then jumped down three lines.

Ugh. She shut the computer down and turned the office chair to face Willow, who hovered nearby like a concerned parent waiting for a doctor

to diagnose her child. "Well, the good news is your keyboard and mouse are not possessed. The bad news is your computer's got hardware issues."

"Figures," Willow muttered so quietly Scottie almost didn't catch it. "Do you think it could be the motherboard?"

Scottie had gone through her mental checklist of the most likely culprits and had arrived at a similar conclusion, but she hadn't expected it from someone in admin. "I'm impressed. You're thinking along the right lines. My money's on the USB controller. That's the part of the motherboard that handles the communication with your USB devices."

Willow nodded as if she understood every word of the computer lingo.

Scottie's admiration grew. "If you get tired of working in Operations, we could use you in IT."

Willow burst out laughing. It wasn't a polite chuckle or a reserved little smile; it was a loud, unfiltered belly laugh that made Barb peek over the low cubicle divider to see what was so amusing about a computer issue.

Even the two employees next to the whiteboard glanced over.

Scottie scrambled not to stare too, but it was a losing battle.

Quickly, Willow reined herself in, yet her hazel eyes still twinkled as if Scottie had told the best joke ever. "God, no," she gasped out, breathless with laughter.

"Hey, maybe try not to sound so horrified at the prospect of working with me." Scottie aimed for an indignant tone, but she couldn't help grinning reflexively.

A strand of hair had escaped as Willow had thrown her head back in laughter, and now she tucked it back behind her ear. "It's not that. But trust me; you don't want me in IT."

Scottie wasn't so sure. She wouldn't mind getting to hear that carefree laugh more often. The sight of Willow so relaxed, so different from her usual guarded self, still stunned her. She had looked so warm, alive...and beautiful.

Focus. She was here to fix the computer, not to be captivated by its user.

"I'll open up the case and see if I find anything obvious. Sometimes you get lucky and find a loose cable or something else that is a quick fix," Scottie said. "But before I do...have you backed up all your files?"

"Yes, of course." Willow looked at her with an expression as if Scottie had asked whether she had put on underwear. "All my files sync automatically to the cloud, and I run hourly backups to two external

drives. Plus I do a manual backup twice a day to a USB drive that I keep disconnected in case of a power surge.”

Scottie pressed a hand to her chest and swayed back and forth. Multiple backups were the sexiest thing ever! “You really know how to make an IT professional swoon!”

Willow didn’t flirt back or react at all. Her expression, which had lit up with warmth when she had laughed earlier, had become shuttered again—polite and unreadable.

Clearly, Willow wanted to keep things professional. Most likely, she was straight. Which was for the best anyway. It wasn’t as if Scottie was looking for another woman to break her heart.

“Let’s take a peek under the hood.” Scottie pushed the chair back, crouched down, and unplugged the power strip. She held the power button down for twenty seconds to let any residual charge dissipate, grounded herself with a quick touch to the metal case, and turned the tower onto its side.

Willow handed over Scottie’s tool kit without having to be asked.

“Thanks,” Scottie said with a grin. “Are you sure you don’t want a job in IT?” Maybe she said it just to see if it would elicit the same laugh again.

It didn’t, but Willow’s lips curled up into a mysterious smile. “Very sure.”

Scottie took out one of her small screwdrivers and opened up the case. The side panel came off easily, revealing a network of wires, circuit boards, and cooling fans.

Before reaching inside, Scottie touched the metal leg of the desk to ground herself again. No way would she damage one of the sensitive components with static electricity, especially not while Willow was watching.

Then she paused. *Wait a minute!* Was that what Willow had been doing when she had touched the desk drawer before shaking Scottie’s hand the first time they had met? But why would she do that? It wasn’t as if she’d been about to touch a delicate microchip.

This was getting more curious by the minute. Scottie had to admit she was intrigued.

But for now, she had to solve the mystery of the malfunctioning computer, not the mystery of Willow Greene.

She forced her attention away from Willow and peered inside the open case. With calm, practiced movements, she traced the various cables and connections to a large circuit board. When she lightly pressed against the

USB connectors, they didn't budge. She had done this dozens of times, but Willow's observant gaze made her oddly aware of every motion.

"Hm," she said after a while. "No obvious smoking gun."

Literally. There were no burn marks. No frayed or loose cables. No bulging capacitors. The power supply to the motherboard looked fine too.

"I still think it's either the USB controller going flaky or a deeper board issue," Scottie said. "The computer sitting on the carpet for so long might have something to do with it. Maybe dust got in and clogged the fans, or the extra static stressed some of the sensitive components."

Barb's head popped up over the divider. "I thought static can't harm computer parts as long as they're inside the case?"

"It won't instantly fry your computer; that's true. But in the long run, a lot of small discharges add up. Combine that with reduced airflow from the dust and the motherboard running hotter than it should, and voilà..." Scottie waved at the exposed guts of the computer. "Here's what you end up with."

Barb murmured something about computers being sensitive divas and ducked back behind the divider.

A long sigh came from Willow. "So, what happens now? Do we have to call Dell and wait for them to send someone?"

Scottie grinned. "No. You're in luck. I got my Dell hardware certification a couple of years ago, so I can resolve most issues myself. I'll take your machine back to the IT dungeon to run a few more tests." With a click, Scottie slid the side panel back into place and fastened the screws before dusting her hands on her chinos.

They stood facing each other for a few seconds, neither saying anything.

Finally, Willow shifted her weight. "When do you think I'll get it back?"

"If I have to swap out the motherboard and we don't have a new one in stock, it could take a few days. But I'll leave you the laptop so you can keep working. It has all the software you need." Scottie plugged in the mouse and keyboard dongles and connected the laptop to Willow's dual monitors so she wouldn't have to squint at the thirteen-inch screen. Then she set the laptop to back up to the cloud automatically. "There. You're good to go."

"Thank you, Scottie."

A grateful Kudos employee saying her name was a totally ordinary thing. Just a polite exchange that happened every day. She shouldn't even

have noticed—and it definitely shouldn't have sent a wave of warmth through her chest.

Willow was only one ticket in a queue of tasks that awaited her attention. A fascinating, smart ticket with a laugh that stopped the world around her, but still just a ticket, nothing more.

Determined, Scottie shouldered her laptop bag, picked up the tower, and tucked it against her side. "I'll keep you posted."

"Thanks," Willow said—without using Scottie's name again.

There was nothing else to say, so Scottie gave her one last nod, called out a quick "Bye, Barb," and crossed the bullpen. She didn't look back, but she could feel Willow's gaze follow her through the glass door and all the way to the elevator.

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