

ONE STEP AWAY

Desperate for a job, a pessimistic college grad finds herself working with a new, lighthearted boss to help people out of the darkness.

19-DE02-W09

**FADE IN:**

**INT. WILLA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT**

WILLA STONE (early 20's) sits at the table alone, looking dejected, wearing a college journalism t-shirt from her not-so-distant past. She is eating from a can of beans.

The electricity shuts off. She slams her spoon against the table.

WILLA

Ugh! I'm only like three days late  
this time!

She grumbles in the darkness. The screen of her phone lights up the room, as it BUZZES with a new email.

Visible on screen - 'CONGRATULATIONS! YOU'RE HIRED!'

The screen, and the room, go dark again.

WILLA (CONT'D)

How did I get hired? They never  
even called me for an interview.

(beat)

Where are my stupid beans?

**EXT. OFFICE - DAY**

Willa enters a small office, sitting amidst a row of storefronts in a downtown area.

**INT. OFFICE**

TOD (50's), a joyful man with an old school vibe and a welcoming appearance, is manning the reception desk. He puts his hands up to his mouth and plays an imaginary trumpet.

TOD

Doot doot do doooo!

Willa turns to leave.

TOD (CONT'D)

Wait!

He hurries around the desk.

TOD (CONT'D)

I apologize. Was that too much? I am Tod. One 'D'. I head up this organization.

Willa reluctantly shakes Tod's outstretched hand.

WILLA

Willa.

TOD

I know.

Tod holds up a copy of her resume and starts down the hall.

**INT. HALLWAY**

Willa follows a few steps behind.

TOD

We need to get you started right away.

Tod hands her a handwritten name tag with the words, "Community Advocate", underneath her name. He continues walking. Willa stares at the tag with a furrowed brow.

WILLA

Hold up. What does this mean?

Tod returns to see her pointing at the job title.

TOD

It means you talk to people who need help.

WILLA

But -- I write. I don't talk.

TOD

Well, I think you would be excellent for this job. Whether you agree to do it or not, remains up to you.

Tod enters a room nearby.

WILLA

(to herself)

Not so sure about that.

She rolls her eyes and follows him in.

**INT. TOD'S OFFICE**

A warm, inviting breeze, from an open window, brushes over Willa's face as she enters the room. The air is filled with the pleasant fragrance of Spring.

Tod is standing by the door and shuts it behind her gently. He motions toward the two chairs in front of his desk.

TOD  
Have a seat.

They both sit.

TOD (CONT'D)  
Let me expand upon the details of  
this position.

He steepled his hands and puts them on the desk.

TOD (CONT'D)  
You would be working with girls  
coming out of human trafficking.

Willa stiffens.

WILLA  
Uh. What? I don't know how to do  
that.

Todd slowly rises.

TOD  
(gently)  
You walked into a place you have  
never been. You believed me when I  
said who I was. You did not see  
anybody else around. You followed  
me down a hall and into a room,  
where I shut the door behind you.

Willa scoots to the edge of her chair. Her eyes glance toward the door.

TOD (CONT'D)  
Everybody is just one decision, one  
step away, from being in a  
different situation. One choice,  
and life is changed forever.

Tod opens the door, then returns to his chair.

TOD (CONT'D)  
You can walk out of here anytime  
you would like. Unfortunately, for  
the girls that need our help, that  
is not the case.

Willa slumps back.

TOD (CONT'D)  
The job is yours, if you want it.

**EXT. STOREFRONT**

Willa exits with haste.

**INT. WILLA'S CAR**

Willa starts the car. The 'Low Fuel' light DINGS on. She hits her palms against the steering wheel. She fishes for change in her cup holder and tosses a handful of coins onto the passenger seat.

Defeated, Willa gets out of the car.

**INT. TOD'S OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER**

Tod is drumming his pen on his desk. There is a light knock on the door.

TOD  
It is always open!

WILLA  
Hi Tod.

TOD  
Hello, Willa. Glad you came back.

WILLA  
I need a job.

**INT. HALLWAY - DAY**

Tod and Willa are standing by a closed door. She subtly wrings her hands.

TOD  
Just follow my lead.

Tod hands her an earpiece.

TOD (CONT'D)  
Place this in your ear.

WILLA  
Whoa. Why?

TOD  
This is how you will hear me.  
Generally, these women tend to be  
more open with females.  
(beat)  
This is something you can do.

Tod leaves.

**INT. CONFERENCE ROOM - MOMENTS LATER**

MELISSA, "MEL" (18), a thin girl, with several tattoos visible on her body, is seated across from Willa.

Willa listens intently for Tod's voice in her ear.

TOD (O.S.)  
Does she prefer to be called  
Melissa?

WILLA  
Should I call you Melissa?

MEL  
Everybody just calls me Mel.

A fading barcode tattoo on Mel's wrist catches Willa's attention.

TOD (O.S.)  
Say: my name is Willa.

Willa restrains an eye roll at Tod's obviousness. She takes a deep breath and smiles politely.

WILLA  
Hi. I'm Willa.

**INT. WILLA'S APARTMENT - DAY**

Willa drops her keys on a table and her backpack on the floor. The evening sun casts an orange glow on the room. She flicks the light switch on. Nothing. Swipes it back down. She plops into a chair and reluctantly opens Mel's file.

**INT. CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY**

Mel looks toward the window, fists clenched on her lap. Willa leans forward. Earpiece in.

TOD (O.S.)  
Get her to elaborate.

WILLA  
How long were you working for him?

MEL  
He's my boyfriend.

Mel's eyes cut to Willa.

WILLA  
Okay.

TOD (O.S.)  
He IS her boyfriend? Like now?

WILLA  
When were you last in contact?

MEL  
Been a while. He's got a lot goin'  
on. But, I got this so...

Mel gestures between them, referring to the sessions.

WILLA  
(off script from Tod)  
I'm not such bad company though,  
huh?

A half-smile breaks on Mel's face.

WILLA (CONT'D)  
I'm glad you're here.

MEL  
Me too.

Willa looks down at some papers. She eases into her question.

WILLA  
(off script from Tod)  
I have your discharge papers here  
from the broken ribs you got last  
week. Was that him?

MEL

It's not like that. He loves me.  
It's just -- you know...

TOD (O.S.)

Follow up and ask her to explain  
what it IS like.

WILLA

Can you tell me what you mean?

MEL

He just... he just does things  
right. And I mess 'em up.

WILLA

Mel, love should never hurt like  
that.

Mel makes eye contact with Willa for a moment.

TOD (O.S.)

Her file also mentions children.

WILLA

It also says here, you have  
children?

Mel shrugs.

MEL

Used to.

**BEGIN MONTAGE:**

**A) INT. OFFICE HALLWAY** - Backpack slung over her shoulder, keys in hand, Willa beholds the art lining the hall walls as she leaves for home. She stops and contemplates on a painting of Christ walking and holding hands with two little children.

**B) INT. CONFERENCE ROOM** - Willa and Mel are seated side-by-side on the sofa. They are deep in conversation. Willa places a finger on Mel's barcode tattoo and taps it gently, a questioning look on her face.

**C) INT. TOD'S OFFICE** - Willa peruses the bookshelf before pulling out a book entitled, "Grief Counseling". Tod stands beside her.

**D) INT. CONFERENCE ROOM** - Willa nods, as she listens intently to Mel.



**E) INT. WILLA'S APARTMENT** - Willa reads the book by flashlight. The overhead light turns back on with the power.

**END MONTAGE**

**INT. CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY**

Willa is sitting alone. She looks at her watch. A soft, melodious whistle is coming from the hall. Tod appears in the doorway. Willa stares straight ahead. He moves to sit opposite of her.

TOD

How are you feeling about your first week here with us?

WILLA

Mel didn't show up this morning.

Tod nods.

WILLA (CONT'D)

I can't help but worry about her.

TOD

I have tried to contact her a couple of times this morning, too. I only reached her voicemail, but we won't jump to any conclusions. And, we won't give up, but sometimes, early on, this happens. You have done all you can for right now.

Willa looks unconvinced.

TOD (CONT'D)

How about you go have some lunch? The food at the cafe around the corner is heavenly.

**INT. WILLA'S CAR - MOMENTS LATER**

Willa sits alone, forehead against the steering wheel.

WILLA

God, please keep her safe.

Her phone BUZZES with a new e-mail. She picks it up.

Visible on screen - 'WHITE OAK NEWS JOURNAL WOULD LIKE TO MAKE YOU A PART OF OUR TEAM. CALL US TO SET UP AN INTERVIEW.'

Willa appears to have an internal debate.

**INT. TOD'S OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER**

Noise coming from the earpiece, sitting on Tod's desk, catches his attention. He brings it to his ear.

WILLA (O.S.)  
 (to herself - unaware Tod  
 is listening)  
 I have to make sure she's okay.

**EXT. MEL'S APARTMENT - LATER**

Willa knocks on the door. She fidgets with her hands. Mel opens the door. She is taken aback.

Willa steps toward Mel in the doorway.

WILLA  
 I didn't want to bother you, but --

Mel puts space between them, and raises her hands as though subconsciously pushing her away.

MEL  
 (hushed)  
 You didn't bother me. I just wasn't  
 feelin' good.

**INT. MEL'S APARTMENT**

Willa takes a step inside and surveys the dimly lit room.

WILLA  
 Do you need me to get you some  
 medicine or food? Anything?

MEL  
 (curtly)  
 No, I'm good.

WILLA  
 Okay. It's just -- I was worried  
 when you didn't show up today --

An imposing figure, MEL'S "BOYFRIEND" (20's), emerges from another room.

MEL'S "BOYFRIEND"  
 Show up for what?

MEL

Well, it -- we -- I, I was --

MEL'S "BOYFRIEND"

(to Willa)

You need to leave.

WILLA

(to Mel)

You can come with me.

Mel's eyes flash in his direction. She swallows.

MEL

Nah. I'm gonna stay here.

He aggressively approaches them. Mel preemptively flinches.

MEL'S "BOYFRIEND"

(gruffly)

Get out.

He shoves Willa. Her back hits the doorframe. Hard. Willa grimaces. A puff of air escapes her.

Tod's hand grabs the back of Willa's jacket and yanks her outside. Willa and Mel's eyes meet as Mel's "boyfriend" slams the door shut.

**INT. WILLA'S CAR - MOMENTS LATER**

Tod and Willa sit in the parking lot. Willa rubs the back of her head.

WILLA

How'd you know I was here?

Tod holds up the earpiece.

WILLA (CONT'D)

You could hear all that? And you didn't tell me how to get her out of there? You've been non-stop in my ear all week -- and then when I really need you, nothing!?

TOD

Willa. We should not even be here.

Willa hangs her head.

WILLA

I just really thought I could help her.

TOD

It is truly difficult to watch people you care about, choose to stay in harmful situations. But, they have free will to make that choice. That is not a reflection of the job you have done.

Willa nods in understanding. Tod gets out of the car. Willa picks up her phone and dials a number.

WILLA

(at phone)

Hi, this is Willa Stone. Thanks for the opportunity, but I've already accepted a position elsewhere.

**INT. CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY**

Withdrawn to her thoughts, Willa comes in and places her coffee on the table. She takes a deep breath and leans against the wall.

Willa is oblivious to the presence of Mel, who is sitting in a chair behind her.

MEL

Are you okay?

Willa lifts her head. A look of hope and relief spreads across her face.

WILLA

Yeah. I am.

Mel crosses the room and buries her head in Willa's shoulder. Caught off guard, Willa wraps her in an embrace. Mel sobs.

WILLA (CONT'D)

I'm going to be here to help you.  
(with a lump in her  
throat)

We can figure things out together.

Still in the embrace, Mel nods.

**INT. TOD'S OFFICE - DAY**

Tod opens his desk drawer. He holds out his hand in front of Willa.

TOD  
Earpiece, please.

Willa removes the earpiece and places it in Tod's palm. He ceremoniously lowers it into the open drawer while humming 'Pomp and Circumstance'.

WILLA  
What are you doing?

TOD  
You help people. And, you help them well.

WILLA  
Wait, I'm not getting that back?

TOD  
You do not need me in your ear anymore. But, if you do need me, of course, I am always here.

Tod pulls a professionally-made name tag from the drawer and places it on the edge of the desk.

Written across the front - WILLA STONE "COMMUNITY ADVOCATE"

TOD (CONT'D)  
You are a true community advocate now!

Tod raises his imaginary trumpet to his mouth.

TOD (CONT'D)  
Doot doo --

WILLA  
(faking exasperation)  
-- Stop.

Willa turns to leave. She comes back and snatches up the name tag. Smiling, name tag in hand, she walks out of the office. Smiling, air trumpet in hand, Tod watches her go.

WILLA (O.S.) (CONT'D)  
See you tomorrow!

**THE END.**