

STEPPING STONES

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INT. SCHOOL COUNSELOR'S OFFICE - DAY

There is a ticking clock on the wall. It sounds louder than it really is. A large desk sets a barrier between the SCHOOL COUNSELOR and the student. There is a distinct, almost claustrophobic feeling in the room.

The counselor wears a dark crimson blazer and her hair in a tight bun, a formidable figure. She sits upright, stiff, even, and squints at her screen closely through her glasses.

CAMERON, a 15-year-old high school freshman, is sitting across from the counselor's desk. He wears a ratty, oversized sweatshirt, and his short black hair is tussled. He looks down, twiddling his thumbs, seemingly deep in thought.

COUNSELOR (O.S.)

Cameron, there was something you wanted to talk about?

He looks up, startled out of his thoughts.

COUNSELOR (CONT'D)

Clearly you have a reason to be here. Otherwise you'd be doing something else.

CAMERON

I don't really do much at lunch.

The counselor sighs. She puts on her best warm smile. It doesn't reach her eyes.

COUNSELOR

What did you want to talk about?
I'm here to help.

A pause. Cameron seems to be summoning his courage.

CAMERON

There's a lot to talk about. Ever since I moved to this school I've felt out of it. I can't keep up with my work, I talk to one person, most of my 8 allotted hours of sleep are spent trying to fall asleep. The rest of my day is spent trying -- and I do mean trying -- to finish my work, which never actually happens. My grades are garbage and my parents were both valedictorians in high school and college, so you can guess how that's going.

(MORE)

CAMERON (CONT'D)

My dog died a month ago and I'm still not over it even though my parents told me I need to move on like everyone else in the world. I kind of want to slip into a coma for the next few months so I don't have to put up with finals, which might not actually be too far off from happening 'cause I zombie-walk through basically every day now. I'm really not doing too well as you can see. And I'm also rambling a lot, sorry about that. I just had to get it all off my chest, have someone actually listen to me.

They pause as the counselor soaks in all this information.

COUNSELOR

Right... well... let's start by looking at the grade book and see where we might be able to improve, okay sweetie?

She smiles. Cameron looks about ready to gag.

CAMERON

I knew this was pointless.

Without another word, he gets up out of his chair and storms out of the room. The counselor gives another great sigh.

COUNSELOR

(to herself)

Can't help someone who won't help themselves...

INT. CAMERON'S HOUSE - EVENING

Cameron steps inside his house, looking haggard. He slams the door shut. Winces. Didn't mean to be so loud.

He hears the clacking of footsteps on the hardwood floor. His mother, JANET, a bony woman in her mid-forties, enters the foyer. She wears a dark blue business shirt and pants, and a sleek grey blazer.

JANET

There you are! God, Cameron, you had me worried sick.

CAMERON

Yeah, I figured... I got all six of your phone calls.

JANET

Well can you blame me? You're always holed up in your room when I get home, you never do anything.

CAMERON

(sarcastic)

Well, the cheer squad wouldn't have me and I almost drowned trying out for swimming, so-

JANET

Okay, Mr. Crabby. What is it that you were doing if it wasn't all the extracurriculars I dared to suggest you do?

She looks at him expectantly.

JANET (CONT'D)

You weren't getting into any trouble, were you? That girl you hang out with-

CAMERON

Mom, Andi is not a delinquent, she just dyed her hair.

JANET

Well you never know. She was raised by crazy hippies. I'm still shocked they never ran off to some trailer park "commune".

Cameron sighs, already exhausted with the conversation.

CAMERON

All I did was go to the library, that's it, that's all. I needed the peace and quiet.

JANET

You always just come home and sit in your room, can't get much quieter than that. What's the real reason?

Beat.

CAMERON

... I went to the counselor today.

Janet raises her eyebrows.

JANET

And...?

CAMERON

(sighs)

She just told me I had to look at my gradebook.

JANET

So basically exactly what I've been telling you for the past month. See? This is why I wanted you to go to her, because for some reason you won't ever listen to me-

CAMERON

Okay, whatever, I get it.

JANET

So did you get any work done at the library? You know, to get those grades up? Pull you out this slump?

CAMERON

No...

JANET

So then why didn't you just come home??

CAMERON

For this *exact reason*. You just sit here and badger me about how you were right, yada yada yada-

JANET

-Well, it's because I am! Cameron, you just have to *deal with your shit*.

CAMERON

Easy for you to say.

JANET

Yes. It is easy for me to say, because it's the truth. "Depression" isn't keeping you in bed past first period, that's just you not wanting to do your work.

(MORE)

JANET (CONT'D)

Your father and I didn't get to
where we're at now by being lazy.

CAMERON

I'm going back to my "hole".

Cameron storms off to his room.

JANET

Great! Call me when you've grown up
a bit.

INT. CAMERON'S ROOM - NIGHT

Cameron sits on the edge of his bed, hunched over his laptop.
He mutters to himself, still lamenting the argument from
before.

He pulls up a WikiHow tutorial. "How To Handle Depression."
There are two steps: "smile more," and "snap out of it." He
sighs.

Next, a reddit forum for fellow depressed teens. "Do I Have
Depression or is it Just Teenage Moping?"

Next question to google: "Can I be depressed if I don't want
to die?"

There's an ad for a tarot card reader that claims to be
better than actual licensed therapists. He doesn't spend too
long looking at that.

He shakes his head, gets up out of bed, and walks to the
bathroom.

He splashes water on his face and looks up into the mirror,
when an idea hits him:

CAMERON

(to himself)

Andi!

He pulls up his phone and dials a number. It goes to
voicemail.

ANDI

(voicemail)

Hi! This is Andi, and I missed your
call! Please just text next time.
Thanks!

Cameron smiles and rolls his eyes.

CAMERON
(leaving a message)
Hey, uh, it's me, Cam, obviously.
I don't want to text because it's
too much on my thumbs but I wanted
to ask you something. We can just
talk tomorrow, so uh... cool.

He hangs up.

EXT. SEATTLE CREST HIGH SCHOOL - MORNING

The school floods with teens in identical uniforms, green sweaters emblazoned with the school symbol.

He peers through the crowd, attempting to find Andi. Not a difficult task, she pops out with her (something or other). Her hair is stringy and wild and she practically radiates chaotic energy.

CAMERON
Jesus, Andi, you look like you've
downed twenty red bulls.

ANDI
Gee, thanks.

She rolls her eyes playfully.

ANDI (CONT'D)
You've known me long enough to know
I'm always like this!

CAMERON
Yeah, yeah, I know.

They start to walk down the crowded hall.

ANDI
You don't exactly look your best
today either. Did you get punched
in the eyes?
(joking)
I told you you could never *actually*
fight someone.

CAMERON
Pshh, yeah, like I know enough
people to have enemies. I just
don't sleep.

Andi laughs.

ANDI
Same, same. Fricken' Physics
class...

They sit down on a bench.

ANDI (CONT'D)
(serious)
I did see that you called me last
night though.

Cameron nods.

CAMERON
I was having a moment, didn't think
about the fact that it was 1AM.

ANDI
... And also the fact that *nobody*
calls anymore! I've said this a
thousand times-

CAMERON
Okay, yeah, sure, is this what you
wanted to talk to me about?

She sighs.

ANDI
No! It's just impossible for me to
be serious for more than half a
second.

CAMERON
Tell me again how you ended up
being my only friend at this
school?

ANDI
Oh, shut up!

They laugh.

ANDI (CONT'D)
I just wanted to ask what was up,
if anything happened.

CAMERON
(sighs)
Nothing huge or anything, just
another fight with my mom.

ANDI
(groans)
Oh God, again?

CAMERON
Yeah, I mean you know how it is by now. I was just stuck in my own head that night thinking about it. Like, *am* I just lazy? I *am* pretty low energy all the time.

ANDI
Please, you're just level-headed. I'm always hopped up on *something*-

CAMERON
This is why my mom thinks you're a delinquent.

ANDI
Okay, bad choice of words. I'm just saying, I'm the definition of high energy and I'm more behind on my stuff than you.

The bell rings and the flood of students begins to disperse.

CAMERON
It's not even that I'm overworked and it's making me upset. I can't even get up the energy to get out of bed in the morning, so writing a paper on *To Kill a Mockingbird* isn't the easiest thing in the world.

ANDI
Yeah, I get it.

CAMERON
It feels like the whole world is in greyscale.

ANDI
Well, all the green and gold is pretty monotonous-
(sees his look)
-I know, not the point, sorry. It sounds pretty serious though, you should really go talk to someone who's not me, I'm a mess. Go see a therapist! Not like your family can't afford it if you're going *here*.

She gestures to the gleaming hallway.

CAMERON

My mom doesn't believe in that stuff, we've talked about this.

ANDI

Your mom is actually crazy - no offense.

CAMERON

Trust me, none taken, in the slightest.

A pause as Andi seems to be deep in thought. Suddenly, she perks up.

ANDI

Just take this stuff into your own hands! Follow me!

She dashes away down the now-empty hall, in the opposite direction of the classrooms. Cameron calls out:

CAMERON

Wait! Are we just ditching first period??

(to himself)

How do you just *forget* about going to class?

He runs after her.

INT. JENNY'S BOOKSTORE - MORNING

Cameron and Andi step into the wide-open store. Aisles of books are listed under categories marked "fiction," "non-fiction," "young adult," etc. Light pours into the room through the windows, basking the store in a warm glow.

CAMERON

So... why did you bring me here?

ANDI

It's a nice spot! I come here all the time. Jenny's super nice even though she doesn't really talk much. She's from the South, so her accent's pretty adorable.

(MORE)

ANDI (CONT'D)

Sometimes I come in here, sit down, and just read through a whole book without paying for it, which might count as some form of stealing now that I think about it, but she never says anything.

CAMERON

Okay... but why are we skipping first period to come here?

ANDI

We are going to find you a self-help book! You love reading so maybe this'll get through to you.

Cameron snorts.

CAMERON

You want me to buy a book that'll give me a list of silly things to "improve my life"?

ANDI

Hey, everyone likes lists. It's easier than figuring out what to do yourself! My mom and I read tons of these and they actually help if you're willing to let them into your heart.

CAMERON

Well now it's sounding like some kind of religious cult.

They start wandering the aisles together.

CAMERON (CONT'D)

Okay, look at *this*.

He pulls out a book entitled, "Please Help Me: A Book About Asking For Help."

CAMERON (CONT'D)

I'm trying to *get help* from this book, but thanks... do they have to be so meta?

Andi pulls out another one, titled, "You and Your Sad Brain." She shows it to Cameron, snickering.

CAMERON (CONT'D)

This is such a joke.

ANDI

Okay, okay, I found a serious one.

She pulls out a book titled, "Stepping Stones to Happiness."

CAMERON

That's such a cliché.

Andi sighs, frustrated.

ANDI

Cam, I'm trying to help you out here. Will you give it a freaking chance?

CAMERON

I'm not gonna pay good money for a book that's not gonna do anything for me.

ANDI

I'll pay, I don't care! I'm making bank!

CAMERON

You make minimum wage working at McDonalds?

ANDI

(exasperated)

God, let me have my positivity! You can be such an ass sometimes.

Cameron looks down at the floor, feeling guilty.

All of a sudden, JENNY pokes her head out from around the aisle.

JENNY

Andi? Who's your friend? Are y'all doin' alright?

CAMERON

Oh, I-

ANDI

He's my cousin. And don't worry about it, Jenny, we're just... plotting world domination. Pretty intense stuff.

JENNY
(bewildered)
Right... well, just keep it down,
okay?

She leaves.

CAMERON
Why'd you say we were cousins?

ANDI
'Cause every person I talk to when
I say we're friends thinks it's
something more than that.

CAMERON
Ah..... yikes.

ANDI
Yeah.

Beat.

CAMERON
I'm sorry for being a dick about
this. I know you're just trying to
help.

ANDI
It's fine. I don't wanna impose or
whatever, I know you need your time
to wallow-

CAMERON
It's not wallowing!

Andi raises a brow.

CAMERON (CONT'D)
... Okay yeah, so I'm wallowing.

ANDI
You've gotta stop that at *some*
point. There's nothing wallowing
can accomplish for you; At least
this book has something to offer,
if it works for you or not. Give it
a shot.

Cameron looks down, deep in thought.

INT. CAMERON'S HOUSE - AFTERNOON

Cameron steps inside the house and shuts the door loudly, announcing his presence without a care. Janet is sitting down at the coffee table. She squints her eyes at the book she's (attempting) to read, her reading glasses not doing much for her. She turns her veiny neck when she hears the door shut.

JANET

If you're trying to avoid me again,
you're not doing a good job.

CAMERON

I wasn't, but okay...

He starts to walk back to his room, but stops as a thought occurs to him. He turns around to face his mom.

CAMERON (CONT'D)

By the way, Mom, I took your
advice.

JANET

What?

CAMERON

You were right! I don't need a
therapist.

JANET

Okay, well-

CAMERON

I have another thing to help me.

He pulls out "Stepping Stones to Happiness," smugly showing her the cover.

Janet squints at it.

JANET

Hold on, I can't read it.

Cameron sighs, irritated that she's ruining his triumphant moment.

JANET (CONT'D)

(after a bit)

... I see. You think a silly book
is the next best thing?

She grabs the book and flips to the back cover, revealing the author, an elderly lady.

JANET (CONT'D)

You think a senior citizen is going to be able to tell you anything about your life? I swear, you'll listen to any older woman who's not me.

She wears a scowl, but there's a sad glint in her eyes.

CAMERON

Okay Mom, well, I'm going to go do my reading now.

He walks off as Janet shouts back at him:

JANET

You'd better mean your biology reading!

She sighs and shakes her head, appearing bewildered and sad.

JANET (CONT'D)

(to herself)

Well, if it helps...

She looks back down at her book, trying to take in what she's reading. She jots down a couple notes and looks up, thinking. Finally, she gets up and shuts it. The title is revealed to be "Helping Your Child Under Stress."

INT. CAMERON'S ROOM - AFTERNOON

Cameron steps into his room and closes the door. He jumps onto his bed and flips open "Stepping Stones" to its first chapter.

He pulls out his phone and texts Andi: "thanks for the help"

He thinks for a second, and texts again: "lets do some of these steps together, need you to keep me honest. Meet @ Jenny's?"

He nods and turns back to the book. As he's reading, a small smile crosses his face.

FADE OUT.