

**The 35 Steps**

by

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FADE IN:

EXT. PAVEMENT. NIGHT

SIGNS SCROLL PAST: CHICKEN SHOP. OFF LICENSE. CHICKEN SHOP.

Inner city street. A smartly-dressed, hand-cuffed COUPLE desperately run away from an (unseen) chasing foe behind them. Towering over them are huge stark tower blocks against the fading sky.

JAMIE CARROLL is slight, 35 but looks after himself, handsome but not quite as handsome as he thinks he is. ELIZA JOHN looks older than Jamie, but it's hard to tell. She's slightly taller, blonde and dressed in 30s/40s style (with a slightly scenester edge). ELIZA looks back.

ELIZA  
(unfazed; deadpan)  
He's catching.

JAMIE  
(angry)  
Hurry up then, for god's sake! I  
can't believe you got me into -

ELIZA  
(interrupts)  
This way.

She abruptly drags him left via the handcuffs.

And they're gone.

EXT. ALLEYWAY. MOMENTS LATER

Dark shadowy alleyway.

ELIZA  
Jamie. Down here.

ELIZA drags JAMIE deeper into the gloom. They catch their breath and listen... No sign of their pursuer.

JAMIE  
(jubilant)  
Thank God! That was close... We  
made it, Eliza, we made it!

ELIZA  
(sly smile)  
Yes, we made it.

They come to a rest against a wall - still handcuffed to each other - like they're lined up to be shot. The railings behind them cast expressionistic shadows.

JAMIE

Yes, WE made it...

(thinks; with meaning)

But YOU put us - ME - in this ridiculous situation in the first place.

(no response)

WHY did you do it?

ELIZA

(playing innocent)

What do you mean?

JAMIE

(growing frustration)

WHY did you make me a criminal?

ELIZA

(with meaning; lets the blow hit)

I didn't make you a criminal...

JAMIE

OK, well, granted... But I'm still the wronged man here. WHY did we run anyway? WHY did you slap these handcuffs on me? And HOW did you lose the bloody key so quickly?

He angrily examines the handcuffs to see if there's a way to loosen them. There isn't.

He looks up at ELIZA, still awaiting a response.

ELIZA

I didn't feel like paying for the meal.

JAMIE

(exasperated)

Sorry, you "didn't feel like paying for the meal".

ELIZA

The service was appalling.

JAMIE

I didn't think it was that bad... Besides that's hardly the point!

ELIZA

I felt like some air.

JAMIE

"Some air"!? We went through all THAT because you fancied some air?

ELIZA  
 Look, I am PAYING for your  
 services, RENT boy.

A sudden cheerful 1940s style TUNE rings out. It's JAMIE's  
 phone. He looks at it - annoyed - and declines the call.

JAMIE  
 (slightly hurt)  
 I'm not a rent boy... Rent boys  
 are...

ELIZA  
 (shrugs)  
 I AM renting you.

JAMIE  
 Well, OK, but I'm not a rent boy,  
 in the traditional "gay" sense.

ELIZA  
 (enjoying herself)  
 But you are "turning tricks".

JAMIE pulls a face.

ELIZA (CONT'D)  
 I'm the customer and the customer  
 is always right.

He looks at the grim alleyway and the handcuffs.

JAMIE  
 In this instance I think it's fair  
 to say that the customer isn't  
 always right.

She shrugs and peers around the corner. She nods.

ELIZA  
 HE's coming - we'd better move...

JAMIE  
 Wha-

She runs for it and because of the handcuffs - and his fear -  
 he really has no choice other than to follow.

EXT. ESTATE STAIRWELL. MOMENTS LATER

Because she's taller than JAMIE, ELIZA has to duck down  
 slightly more than he does under the stairs. Nearby a bright  
 artificial lighting blinks on and off.

ELIZA  
 See, told you. The customer IS  
 always right.

JAMIE  
 (quietly furious)  
 Shut up!

She peers out towards their (unseen) pursuer.

Awkward beat. ELIZA sees that she 'has' to say something.

ELIZA  
 He didn't look THAT Japanese, the  
 restaurant manager, did he?

JAMIE  
 (hushed anger)  
 Who CARES?

The cheerful TUNE rings out again from JAMIE's phone. ELIZA mockingly puts her finger to her lips as he tries to muffle it as he struggles to decline the call. Finally he does.

ELIZA mock-pensively looks around the corner.

ELIZA  
 He looks more Slovakian. Possibly  
 Bavarian, at a push.

JAMIE  
 Look have you seen the SIZE of that  
 guy... How HARD he fell when you  
 FORCED me to trip him up. It takes  
 a big man to fall that hard, a BIG  
 man. And now he wants our blood.

He waves his hands around to make his point, forgetting that her hand is handcuffed to his. She makes a great show of acting like a puppet mimicking his movements mockingly.

ELIZA  
 (sign-song)  
 "Like a puppet on a string!"  
 (game playing)  
 Anyway he wants YOUR blood, not  
 mine... Either way: he seems to  
 have moved on. But... We'd better  
 stay here for a moment, just in  
 case. He seems really very  
 insistent on chasing us down -  
 sorry - YOU down.

JAMIE  
 Yes. Well, if you hadn't have  
 stabbed him in the hand with an  
 'authentic' skewer and left him  
 with our massive bill...

She looks at him, mock-offended.

ELIZA  
Ass peddler.

JAMIE  
Well, no, because that suggests  
that my ass is being... peddled.

ELIZA  
Oh, I see... How much extra does  
that cost?

JAMIE  
Funny.

His phone rings its stupid TUNE again. She TUTS. And he looks at it, frustratedly trying to work out how to put it on silent. He settles for declining the call again.

JAMIE (CONT'D)  
It's new. Haven't quite worked it  
out yet.

ELIZA  
(ignores him)  
You're rough trade though, at  
least, right?

JAMIE  
(genuinely hurt)  
Hey, I'm not rough...

She strokes his smooth face.

ELIZA  
Gay for pay?

JAMIE  
I'm NOT gay; YOU'RE are a woman.

He finally takes the time to look at her properly - her face harshly lit by the nearby winking broken light. Their eyes meet. A flicker of something from JAMIE.

ELIZA breaks away, nominally to look out for their pursuer.

JAMIE (CONT'D)  
WAIT a minute... Why have you got  
make-up on that makes you look  
OLDER than you actually are. Isn't  
the whole point of make-up to make  
you look YOUNGER than you actually  
are?

She deliberately doesn't respond and, despite their close proximity, looks around him keeps look out.

JAMIE (CONT'D)

What age are you REALLY? My age, maybe?

ELIZA

(looking out; not thinking)

Oh no, five years younger...

JAMIE

HOW do you know that?

ELIZA flinches ever-so-slightly, she's said too much.

ELIZA

Your age? It's on your ass peddler profile.

JAMIE

No. No, it's not. It in no way mentions that I'm... thirty-five.

ELIZA

(smirks; the game is up)  
Well, OK. As we're SUCH good friends now... I'm a fan.

JAMIE

You're a fan?

He stands up and hits his head.

ELIZA

Of your band.

(beat)

Palladium.

JAMIE

(mixture of slight fear and pride)

Oh... Oh.

(beat; lying)

I'd almost forgotten about THAT...  
Yes, I suppose we did almost hit the big time. After a fashion.

(wistful)

A couple of tours. Some TV. A record deal. Fans in every - well, most - towns.

She gazes at him, suddenly all doe-eyed.

ELIZA

Don't you remember me?

Awkward beat. Full eye contact. Unsure, JAMIE tries to work out if this is another act.

JAMIE  
I didn't... Did I?

ELIZA  
(wry grin)  
Well...

Beat.

JAMIE  
Did I? Or didn't I?

ELIZA  
Oh don't worry, you didn't actually  
fuck me.

JAMIE  
And you were... At the time...

ELIZA  
What?

JAMIE  
You know.

ELIZA  
No, what?

JAMIE  
Of age.

Beat.

ELIZA  
(looks out again)  
I think he's coming back this way,  
we'd better get going again.

JAMIE  
So...

ELIZA  
Borderline.

JAMIE  
Oh, right.

They quickly move on.

EXT. BLEAK PARADE OF SHOPS. MOMENTS LATER

Out of breath, they come to an abrupt halt pressed against a wall, underneath a threadbare awning of a long-closed Restaurant. The handcuffs twisted around so their hands are almost holding. The BLARING of a police car approaches.

ELIZA  
 (faking; theatrical)  
 Oh, DAH-LING!

ELIZA forces JAMIE to kiss her as the SIRENS get nearer. After a brief initial awkwardness they both appear to enjoy it... But ELIZA seems to find it a lot easier to suddenly disengage once the threat has passed.

ELIZA (CONT'D)  
 You're pretty good, for a company girl.

JAMIE  
 (dazed; faint smile)  
 Thanks.

She looks out and JAMIE watches her intently.

JAMIE (CONT'D)  
 I still don't get why we ran from the restaurant.

ELIZA  
 It's been an exciting evening, hasn't it?

JAMIE  
 (realises she's right)  
 Well, yes... But that's still not the point.

ELIZA  
 Well, to put it bluntly, I can't afford the trick AND the meal... I figured the meal was the least important of the two... And the service really was appalling.

JAMIE  
 (thinks; almost swayed)  
 Yes... I suppose so.

They both hear something and she peers around the corner.

ELIZA  
 Ah. A copper's joined in the hunt.

JAMIE  
 Shit.

She suddenly looks at him hard.

ELIZA  
 So, what's stopping you making a run for it?

JAMIE

Other than the fact I'm handcuffed to you?

ELIZA

(suddenly serious)

You're a 'wronged' man in a tight spot, I'm sure you could find a way.

He looks her up and down and then at the handcuffs again, weighing up his options...

ELIZA (CONT'D)

AND the fact I could spill the beans to the nice policeman AND the angry Bavarian/Japanese restaurant manager... AND your lovely fiancé that you're a prostitute, of course... It's your choice.

JAMIE thinks. ELIZA waits, although she hides it well, she's actually worried that she's finally lost him.

JAMIE suddenly snaps into action and drags ELIZA in the opposite direction of their pursuers.

JAMIE

This way...

ELIZA can't help but grin widely. She's winning.

EXT. ALLEYWAY OVERLOOKING THE RESTAURANT. MOMENTS LATER

They come to a crouching sudden stop behind some bins. In the distance is the Japanese restaurant.

JAMIE

How did you know I had a fiancé?

ELIZA delays answering by nonchalantly fiddling with her handcuff - it's cutting off the circulation to her hand.

ELIZA

I'm an obsessive fan. We know these things.

JAMIE

Yeah, I guess...

ELIZA

But what I really don't understand is why you're a floosie, a harlot... A gigolo?

His phone rings the ridiculous TUNE again. She leans over and slowly and deliberately, but mock-innocently, takes the phone out of his pocket - and declines the call for him.

JAMIE

(takes a moment to compose himself)

The money. Weddings are expensive.

ELIZA

And...

JAMIE

And?

ELIZA

Yes, AND...

JAMIE

And... To be honest I needed some real excitement again.

ELIZA

Since the band?

JAMIE

(admits defeat)

Yes... Since the band.

ELIZA

SO, are you, and please correct me if I'm wrong, effectively monetising your PRE-marital affairs?

JAMIE

You could look at it that way.

ELIZA

One last grim hurrah before settling down?

JAMIE

You could look at it that way.

ELIZA

Prostituting yourself in order to a pay for the very normalcy that seems to so terrify you?

JAMIE

(beat)

You COULD look at it that way.

They both stare at the restaurant, unsure of what to do or say next.

JAMIE (CONT'D)

(confessional)

It was a stupid idea anyway... This was my first time. Probably was going to be the only time too. But it's DEFINITELY going to be the only time now. Assuming we get away with it, of course...

(turns on the charm)

But there was just SOMETHING about your message to the Agency.

ELIZA

Really? I thought I'd made it deliberately generic.

JAMIE

(doesn't miss a beat)

There was something about its very generic-ness that suggested... mystery.

ELIZA

Right...

They're both playing characters now. And they both know it. Or at least they both think they know it. Either way - it excites them both, even though they're both expertly hiding their excitement from each other.

JAMIE's phone rings it's ridiculous TUNE again. He looks at ELIZA and finally turns it off, with meaning. She smiles.

ELIZA (CONT'D)

So: we've come full circle.

They both stare at the restaurant.

JAMIE

Yup... You want to go back in there and get the key, don't you?

ELIZA

We can't do this all night.

They're both disappointed by the thought that they can't.

JAMIE

(with meaning)

Not... All night.

ELIZA

(grins)

Uh-huh.

They stand up and ready themselves.

JAMIE

I can't believe you left key at the restaurant.

ELIZA

No? We all make mistakes.

From behind: the handcuffed figures of JAMIE and ELIZA silhouetted against the street lamp light ahead - they hold hands for the first time.

In ELIZA's free other hand behind her back we see the key to the handcuffs. And before she can close this hand, JAMIE catches a glimpse of it. He smiles, nods to himself, and pretends he hasn't seen it.

Still from behind: they both make a desperate, yet gleeful run towards the restaurant, still holding handcuffed hands.

FADE OUT.