

13 STEPS

Written by
Loren Davis

Contact:
Loren Davis
707-484-2270
Ldavis@sonic.net

FADE IN:

SUPER: "Arizona Territory 1884."

EXT. DESERT FOOTHILLS - DAY

Dawn breaks across a vast expanse of cracked earth and scraggly bushes. A horse grazes on the bare stubble of grass near a crackling campfire, a coffee pot steams, a worn blanket lies on the ground, and a saddle rests on an abandoned, broken wagon wheel.

OLDER ALICE (V.O.)
I never knew my mother. She died
when I was little. I can't even
remember what she looked like.

A MAN grabs the blanket and shakes it out. This is TOM BURROUGHS, 29, strong, lean, stern face weathered by the unforgiving sun and winds. He exudes danger, like a pit viper ready to strike.

He reaches down, picks up his gun belt with holster, pistol, and sheathed knife, and buckles it around his waist.

OLDER ALICE (V.O.)
My father? Now that's another
story.

Tom draws his pistol out. Examining it with a practiced eye. He turns the cylinder and hears a CLICK. He glances towards the ground across the campfire, returns his attention to his pistol, and continues checking each round. Finished he holsters it.

OLDER ALICE (V.O.)
His name was Tom Burroughs. People
in the territories said he was a
notorious bank robber and a cold-
blooded killer. No one dared cross
him. Not if they wanted to stay
alive that is.

Tom's eyes scan the foothills, a glint of something deeper shining through as he gazes at the rising sun. He watches the flames ripple, lost in thought.

OLDER ALICE (V.O.)
But that's not how I remember him.

He walks to the other side of the campfire and looks down at another blanket with a small object bundled up under it.

His roughened hand reaches down and tenderly shakes whatever is underneath.

TOM
(softly)
Hey.

After a moment he pulls the blanket back and looks at a small child. This is ALICE BURROUGHS, six years old.

ALICE
(Sleepily)
No...

Toms eyes GO WIDE and with one fluid motion he draws his knife and throws it.

CLOSE ON: a quivering scorpion next to Alice, pinned mid-body by the blade.

Tom retrieves his knife, flings the dead scorpion away with a flick, and returns the knife to its sheath.

Alice yawns, oblivious to the danger passed.

TOM
Get up.

ALICE
Daddy...

TOM
Get up. We gotta hit the trail.

ALICE
Just a bit more?

TOM
You can sleep a bit more tonight.

ALICE
But it's night now!

Alice pulls the blanket over her head, curling back into a sleepy ball.

Tom walks back to the campfire, squatting to pour himself a cup of coffee, eyes never leaving his daughter. The mean look gone, replaced by a smile and the most loving look ever in his eyes.

TOM
Get up.

Sleepily Alice gets up, her breath condensing in the chill morning air. She rubs her eyes, wraps the blanket around herself, walks over, and gives her father a hug and a kiss.

Alice shivers, prompting Tom to snug the blanket more tightly around her.

He hands her a piece of wood for the fire. She tries to place it in the flames.

TOM (CONT'D)
Here, like this.

He takes her hand and guides her to place it properly. A small amount of sparks fly as she lets go. Tom smiles and rubs her head.

TOM (CONT'D)
Want some coffee?

Alice grimaces.

ALICE
How can you drink that stuff?
Tastes like burnt dirt.

Tom chuckles, enjoying her feigned disgust.

He goes to his saddle, opens a side pouch, pulls out a piece of jerky, and hands it to Alice.

ALICE (CONT'D)
Don't we have anything else?

TOM
You can go hungry the rest of the day if you want.

Alice pouts and chews on her jerky. Tom puts out the campfire and starts saddling up the horse.

ALICE
When are we going to just stay somewhere?

Tom finishes tightening the girth, gazes into the distance, and then back at Alice.

TOM
Soon. I promise.

Tom packs everything away, mounts up, and reaches down to Alice. She frowns and crosses her arms.

ALICE

When?

TOM

Maybe after today.

ALICE

Promise?

Tom beckons her closer with his fingers.

Alice moves close to the saddle. Tom lifts her up gently and places her on the saddle in front of him. Alice still pouts.

TOM

Hey.

Alice looks up at her father's warm smile. Her frown melts into a grin.

They ride off as Tom returns to his alert and mean as a pit viper features. Predator eyes searching left, right, and forward, not missing a thing. Alice continues chewing on her jerky.

EXT. DESERT PINE FOREST - LATER

Two MEN on horseback wait on the crest of a hill overlooking the town of Prescott. These are JACK MARTIN, 25, slight build but sharp-eyed, and his older brother WILL MARTIN, 31, burly and hardened by the sun.

Will looks sullen and mean, the desert sun hardens his glare. Jack has a ready smile and whittles on a small block of wood. A shotgun hangs from his saddle.

They watch an approaching speck on the horizon.

JACK

Reckon that's them?

Will pulls out a plug of tobacco from his coat, slicing off a piece with a large knife, and puts it in his mouth, chewing slowly and deliberately.

WILL

Who the hell else would it be?

He spits a glob of dark juice on the ground near Jack's horse.

Jack holds out his hand expectantly. Will ignores him, eyes fixed on the approaching riders.

Tom and Alice ride up.

Jack folds up his pocketknife, puts it away, and tips his hat to Alice.

TOM
Mornin.

JACK
Howdy.

Will stares at Tom, a blend of grudging respect and deep-rooted animosity behind his hard, silent expression.

TOM
Just as friendly as ever. I see.

Will spits a bit of chew onto the ground close to Tom's horse, his eyes never leaving Tom.

JACK
Oh, he'd steal the coins right off
a dead man's eyes today.

Will glares at Jack with disdain and points his knife at him.

WILL
If'n we wasn't brothers I would
have put a bullet through your god-
damned eye a long time ago.

Jack leans back in his saddle.

JACK
Well then, I guess I'll just
consider myself born under a lucky
star that we is flesh and blood
kin.

Will turns his head and starts to put his knife back in its sheath. In a blur Jack draws his pistol, pointing it at Will's face as he pulls the hammer back and locks it. Caught off-guard Will freezes.

JACK (CONT'D)
You're getting old there big
brother. But then I'm quicker than
you ever were. What was it you
always preached to me about never
catching a weasel asleep?

Will cracks a brief grin then goes back to stone face.

JACK (CONT'D)
Now, just put that toothpick back
where it belongs.

Will sheathes his knife.

Jack eases the hammer down, spins the pistol on his finger,
and seats it back in his holster. He takes out his pocket
knife and goes back to carving.

Will looks at Tom.

WILL
You got a plan?

TOM
Mine payroll should arrive on the
stage in a bit. We ride down, wait
for it to roll in, and hit it as
soon as they move the strongbox
off.

WILL
Again? That plan almost got us
strung up last time.

Tom levels a hard gaze at Will.

TOM
You think I don't know what I'm
doing?

For a moment fear shadows Will's rugged face.

WILL
No offense meant.

TOM
No offense taken then. If you think
you have a better idea let's hear
it.

Tom's unwavering gaze stares him down.

TOM (CONT'D)
Come on, spit it out.

WILL
Hell, I ain't never was one for
doin much plannin anyway.

TOM
Ok, we'll do what's worked before.
You in or out?

Will and Jack nod. Tom pulls out a beaten-up gold pocket watch.

TOM (CONT'D)
We got a bit over an hour.

Tom closes the watch and puts it away.

Alice stares at the wooden figure Jack has been carving, fascination lighting up her face. Jack smiles and hands it to her.

JACK
Here you go, young lady.

She smiles with childlike wonder as she takes it.

ALICE
What is it?

JACK
I don't know for sure. Could be a cow, maybe a sheep... maybe a bear?

ALICE
I think it looks like a bear!

JACK
You're right, it does look like a bear. You know Indians around these parts consider bears big medicine.

ALICE
Does it have a name?

JACK
Not yet. Why don't you give it one?

Alice hugs the bear tightly to her chest.

ALICE
Don't know of one yet.

Tom looks at Alice with a warm smile.

TOM
What do you say?

ALICE
(to Jack.)
Thank you!

Tom gives a quick nod of thanks to Jack then spurs his horse and rides over to a nearby grove of trees.

He stops and dismounts, lifts Alice off, places her in a hidden and shady spot, gets a canteen off the saddle, and hands it to her.

TOM

Wait here with your bear.

ALICE

How long?

Tom sees a tear slip down one of Alice's eyes and with a soft thumb wipes it away.

TOM

Not too long. I'll be back and get you as soon as I can. Promise.

Tom gives her a smile and a kiss on her forehead then mounts up. Alice watches him ride away with a worried look as she nervously rubs her bear.

Tom rejoins the brothers.

WILL

This sure as hell ain't no way to raise a kid. Even I know that.

TOM

And leave her where? In some damn orphanage? That ain't never gonna happen.

WILL

And ridin' with a bunch of outlaws? How you think that's gonna end, huh? Maybe watchin you get strung up from a tree someday? You want that?

Anger builds in Tom's face as he locks eyes with Will again. Will, unfazed and confident, meets Tom's glare without hesitation.

Tom turns his horse towards town and then turns back towards Will.

TOM

I know she deserves better.

With that, he spurs his horse towards town.

The brothers exchange looks. Will spits out another bit of chew.

WILL
I said my piece.

Will and Jack put spurs to their horses and follow.

EXT. TOWN OF PRESCOTT ARIZONA - DAY

A typical western mining boom town. Sun-baked dirt streets, wooden buildings, saloons, and gambling halls.

The gang rides into town eyes scanning the surroundings with a mix of caution and anticipation.

They pull up to a hitching rail across from the headquarters of the Prescott Mining Company, dismount in a synchronized rhythm that speaks of practiced ease, tie up their horses, and stride to a saloon.

INT. SALOON - CONTINUOUS

The gang enters, spurs clinking against the wooden floorboards. Their eyes adjust to the dimly lit smokey interior which stands in sharp contrast to the blistering sun outside.

It's everything you'd expect of an Old West saloon. A large imposing wooden bar, tobacco smoke lingering heavily in the air, several tables, a poker game, a few WHORES, and several dusty MINERS and COWBOYS in various stages of enjoying themselves and getting drunk.

They sit at an empty table near a grimy window. Tom scans the room and catches the eye of the grizzled bartender, HENRY, 50 years old.

TOM
Three beers.

WILL
And make 'em cold.

Tom's eyes settle on a double-barreled shotgun mounted on the wall behind the bar. Its polished surface gleaming like a predator eyeing its prey.

HENRY
Cold'll be extra.

TOM
Extra?

HENRY

You get what you pay for, partner.

Henry's eyes narrow, warily sizing Tom up.

A lone figure stands at the end of the bar nursing a beer and watching Tom's every move. This is COLE, early 40's, dressed plainly and ruggedly. Unlike the others in the saloon, Cole is unarmed.

Tom gets up and walks to the bar. He slaps the bar with an open hand.

TOM

Make 'em cold then.

Henry turns to grab three mugs. Tom's eyes focus on the shotgun then back at Henry, sizing him up as he draws the beers.

TOM (CONT'D)

Expecting trouble?

Henry glances over his shoulder, assessing Tom with a calculating gaze.

HENRY

Expecting to prevent it.

Tom's eyes return to the shotgun as Henry turns back to the bar and sets the three mugs down with a THUD.

Henry's gaze hardens.

HENRY (CONT'D)

Six bits.

Tom places three coins on the bar, takes a sidelong glance at Cole, then takes the beers back to the table, passes them out, and sits down.

Henry's and Cole's eyes follow Tom's every move.

INT. SALOON - LATER

Tom's glass sits nearly full while the others are all but empty. He checks his pocket watch and then glances at Jack.

TOM

Take a look.

Jack rises and steps to the window, his dark outline framed against the bright sun-lit exterior.

He scans the dusty street, alert for any signs of trouble. After a moment he returns to the table, his eyes meeting Tom's.

JACK
Looks good.

Tom pushes his untouched beer aside and stands.

TOM
Let's do it.

Jack and Will down their beers, then all three head toward the door.

Henry watches from behind the bar, a look of curiosity and concern. He casts a glance at Cole who watches with silent intensity as the three walk out the door.

EXT. STREET - DAY

They split up. Each man takes a strategic position. The wait is tense but not long.

Hooves ECHO as the STAGECOACH rolls into town and pulls up outside the mining company office. The horses panting and frothing from their long journey.

The DRIVER, a lean and hawk-eyed fellow of 30, clambers down and opens the door of the stage. TWO PASSENGERS, a man and a woman, step out and walk away. Tom crosses the street towards the stage, tipping his hat to the woman as they pass.

The GUARD, a burly man of 40, sets his shotgun aside, reaches under the seat, and with both hands pulls out the STRONGBOX and with a grunt of exertion, hands it down to the driver. The driver starts to turn.

Tom's quick strides narrow the gap. He draws his pistol, pressing it under the driver's jaw.

TOM
Drop it.

The driver hesitates.

TOM (CONT'D)
You want to see your wife and kids again?

The driver releases the strongbox which lands with a THUD, and backs away, hands in the air.

Will walks up to the guard and holds his pistol on him.

WILL
Just keep your hands where I can
see 'em.

A flicker of fear crosses the guard's face, but he holds still.

Jack rides up with the other two horses. He dismounts with his shotgun, strides over to the strongbox, and BLASTS the lock off. Cash explodes from its confines.

Tom reaches in, pulls a thick wad of cash out, and holds it over his head so Will and Jack can see it. Will finally breaks into a smile.

WILL (CONT'D)
Yeah!

In his moment of excitement, Will is distracted. A sudden movement as the guard lunges for his shotgun.

TOM
(shouting)
WILL!

BOOM!

Will takes the hit, buckshot tearing into his stomach like a hot iron, returning fire as he collapses. Both men crash to the ground.

Panic erupts as people scatter in fear.

Amid the chaos, the driver draws his pistol and shoots Tom in his side. Tom shoots the driver who crumbles in a heap.

Tom kneels next to Will, cradles his head, looks into his eyes as Will gasps for breath, blood pooling beneath, and watches the final spark of life fade from him. He gently sets Will's head down.

Struggling to stand and painfully clutching his wound, he stumbles to the street. A wad of cash clutched in his bloody hand as Jack brings up their horses.

JACK
Guess ol Will got just a dang bit
too old and too slow.

They hastily mount up.

TOM

Best just get out of here.

Suddenly, Henry bursts out of the saloon, leveling his shotgun at Jack.

BOOM! BOOM!

Jack falls lifeless to the ground.

Tom retaliates shooting Henry dead as he struggles to reload.

Cole rushes out of the saloon, heading to Henry who lies sprawled out on the ground.

Tom draws down on him but hesitates, his finger hovering over the trigger, finally holstering his pistol when he sees Cole is unarmed and his empty hands reaching toward his fallen friend.

Tom spurs his horse out of town, slumped over the saddle, galloping to where he left Alice.

EXT. TREES WHERE ALICE WAITS - LATER

The branches above rustle gently in the breeze, sunlight dappling the forest floor. Alice waits beneath the trees, still playing with her bear, her gaze fixed on the path ahead. She looks up as she hears the galloping hooves of a horse and sees her father approaching.

As Tom rides into view, his face drawn and ashen, clutching the saddlehorn. Alice's face lights up.

ALICE

Daddy!

She reaches up to him, joy overcoming her. But as Tom reaches down to lift her he falters, wincing in pain. Alice's gaze drops to his hand gripping her arm and sees blood seeping through his fingers, pooling against her arm.

Realization and fear hit her like a cold wave, her trembling hands grip the wooden bear tighter, tears flood her eyes.

ALICE (CONT'D)

(screaming)

NO!

Seeing her face dissolve into terror and fear Tom forces a reassuring smile, masking his pain as best he can.

TOM

Don't worry honey. It ain't as bad
as it looks. I'll be fine.

Despite his attempts at reassurance, Alice's face crumbles into tears. She looks up at him still crying, bewilderment and fear written across her features.

Tom's voice grows softer, laced with urgency.

TOM (CONT'D)

You're going to have to get up here
by yourself. But make it real
quick, ok?

Alice's eyes blink back tears, trembling at the enormity of the situation, and she nods. She struggles, climbing onto the saddle in front of him, determination shaking off her fear.

Gritting his teeth against the pain Tom takes a shaky breath, wraps a protective arm around her, and gallops away, hooves POUNDING against the earth.

EXT. DESERT FOOTHILLS - LATER

Tom pushes the horse to its limits, the animal's sides heaving like bellows.

Suddenly, GUNFIRE erupts behind them. Tom glances back, spotting a POSSE of hard-faced men on their trail. A dust cloud swirling in their wake.

He spurs the panting horse to go faster, urgency etched on his face.

BULLETS whiz by. The horse can't go any quicker and by the sounds of gunfire, the posse is gaining ground.

Tom draws his pistol, turns back towards the posse, firing a few desperate shots in a haze of adrenaline.

Alice SCREAMS, covering her ears as the chaos unfolds around her.

TOM

Hold on honey.

Tom holsters his weapon, concentrating on their escape.

The posse gains ground. Tom's heart pounds in his chest, focus narrowing to only Alice. The horse falters gasping.

A sharp CRACK echo's as a bullet hits the grip of his pistol, shattering it.

TOM (CONT'D)

Damn it!

He looks back and sees the posse closer still.

TOM (CONT'D)

Can't do it!

He pulls back on the reins, halting the horse. He turns the horse around to face the posse, raising his hands slowly over his head.

TOM (CONT'D)

Sorry honey, I can't risk you getting hurt.

The posse rapidly surrounds him, among the posse, a grim-faced Cole rides in. One posse member removes Tom's pistol. Another tries to pull Alice off the saddle. Alice clings to her father, her cries punctuating the air.

ALICE

Daddy... Please!

TOM

Don't hurt her! She's just a child!

She resists and clings tighter to her father, her cries piercing the air. The man gets rough with her. Tom's restraint snaps as he lunges, landing a punch to his face, pulling him in close.

TOM (CONT'D)

I'll kill you if you fucking hurt her!

The man recoils, surprised and frightened, and lets Alice go.

Cole moves his horse in. His demeanor calm yet unwavering.

COLE

(firmly)

I got her.

Tom gaze darts to Cole's waist - he is still unarmed. They lock eyes, tension thick between them.

COLE (CONT'D)

She'll be safe with me. You got my word.

Tom quickly sizes Cole up, then turns to Alice.

TOM
Honey, go with him. You'll be fine.
Just... trust me.

Alice's eyes shimmer with tears, a flicker of fear and confusion, before she nods reluctantly.

Cole gently lifts Alice away, places her in front of him on his horse, and backs away. Alice looks at her father, her tearful eyes pleading silently.

The other posse members close in, ropes at the ready, and tie Tom up.

INT. PRESCOTT JAIL - LATER

Tom is thrust into a cell whose heavy iron door CLANGS SHUT behind him. He grabs the steel bars of the window, staring out to see Alice sitting on the saddle of Cole's horse. No longer crying, she radiates a quiet, steely resilience.

EXT. PRESCOTT JAIL - CONTINUOUS

Alice climbs down from the saddle and walks toward the jail window, her wooden bear clutched to her chest. She hesitates, glancing back at Cole whose smile is disarming yet guarded. He motions for her to continue.

Reaching the window she takes her wooden bear, reaches up on tip-toes, and hands it to Tom through the bars.

ALICE
Here, Daddy.

Their eyes meet. Alice's face is a mix of bravery and childlike innocence, her eyes searching for comfort in Tom's gaze.

TOM
I love you, honey. I'm sorry.

A tear runs down Tom's cheek as he reaches out and gently touches Alice's hand.

With a quiet determination, Alice turns and walks away as Tom's gaze follows her, showing a mixture of pride and sadness.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - DAY - A WEEK LATER

Tom is shackled and being led from the jail, down the main street to the gallows. He holds the wooden bear Alice gave him. A CROWD lines the street, anxious whispers and murmurs fill the air. Tom fights against his shackles, rage bubbling to the surface.

TOM

What are you all looking at you
gutless, bottom-feeding snake
fuckers.

A JAILER following behind strikes him with the butt end of his shotgun.

JAILER

Shut yer mouth.

Tom stumbles, shrugs off the blow, spitting on the ground as he continues. The jailer hits him again. Tom quickly whirls, grabs the shotgun, and pulls the jailer in close, face-to-face.

TOM

Bet you don't feel so mighty damn
brave now, do ya?

Tom pushes the jailer back, watching as he stumbles and lands hard on his backside, looking up at Tom who spits on him. Tom turns toward the gallows and then back at the jailer.

TOM (CONT'D)

Well? You coming?

The jailer scrambles to his feet, fear creeping into his demeanor, as Tom turns back towards the gallows and continues his march.

In the crowd he spots Alice standing hand-in-hand between Cole and a WOMAN, call her SARAH, late 30's. Both look simple, plain, and hard working.

Alice steps forward in front of her father, breaking free from Cole and Sarah's protective grip. Tom's angry resolve disappears. A silence falls over him as he smiles and kneels. Alice throws her arms around him, squeezing tight. Tom gently strokes Alice's hair. The crowd becomes silent.

TOM (CONT'D)

This isn't any place for you.

ALICE
(sobbing)
I'm not leaving you!

Cole and Sarah step out, sadness and concern mark their faces. Each rests a hand on Alice, their faces pleading silently with Tom.

TOM
(barely above a whisper)
It's okay, honey.

The jailer nudges Tom with the shotgun. A cruel reminder of his impending fate.

Tom gives Alice a lingering hug, kisses her on her forehead, stands, and looks down at her, gently stroking her cheek.

TOM (CONT'D)
Now walk away, and don't look back.
Please? For me.

Tom's eyes shift to Cole, searching for a promise.

TOM (CONT'D)
Your word... still good?

Cole meets Tom's piercing gaze, his jaw tightening, steely resolve on his face.

TOM (CONT'D)
Then take her away from here.
(beat)
And raise her right.

Tom nods at them. They exchange sorrowful smiles and nod in agreement.

Alice, Cole, and Sarah turn and disappear into the crowd. Tom watches them go, drawing a deep breath.

He takes a few steps and climbs the 13 steps of the gallows. At the top, he turns, scans the crowd, and finds Alice walking away hand-in-hand between Cole and Sarah.

Cole lifts Alice and holds her close. She wraps her arm around his neck, her gaze drifting back to Tom. Her small hand wipes a tear away. Their eyes meet for a moment of connection before she turns, looking ahead.

Hope beams in Tom's eyes, his lips curl into a bittersweet smile, a sense of peace washing over him as he stands tall, embracing his fate one last time.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - LATER

A light rain falls on the deserted town square, casting a somber tone. The empty gallows stands eerily silent and haunting with a rope and a hangman's noose swaying in the breeze.

The camera ZOOMS IN on the small wooden bear lying half-buried, forgotten in the mud.

The sound of FOOTSTEPS breaks the silence and announces Alice's approach.

She walks up to the bear, staring down for a few seconds, kneels, and gingerly picks it up. A tear runs down her cheek as her fingers trace its form, gently wiping the mud away. She rises and looks up at the gallows, focusing on where her father last stood, an unspoken sadness in her gaze.

She presses the bear to her heart, her grip tightening.

OLDER ALICE (V.O.)
I was adopted by a childless couple
in town. They were good people and
raised me right.

A soft smile crosses Alice's lips.

OLDER ALICE (V.O.)
At sixteen, I married and bore a
son. I named him Tom.

Slowly, she turns and walks away.

The rope and hangman's noose that once swayed in the breeze stand still as Alice's figure gradually fades away and blurs against the backdrop of the town square, leaving behind only footprints.

FADE TO BLACK: