

## DECAY

### Chapter One: Mind your steps.

“...and eleven, and twelve. Twelve. Why twelve again? Why twelve?”

James Monroe shivered and quickly climbed down the stairwell. He took a deep breath, raised his head and stared at the grey sky above him. The sun was still shining behind the clouds. This was definitely a good sign.

James turned around and gradually lowered his head. The City Tribunal was right before him. The statue of Lady Justice towered over him, severe, imposing, and made of very real marble. Everything seemed like it had always been.

There was only one problem: yesterday there were thirteen steps from the square below him to the entrance of the tribunal. There had been thirteen steps the day before yesterday. And every day of the last week. And every day of the last year. Always thirteen.

Twelve today.

James had counted them every time he climbed up and down the stairwell before going to work. He liked counting things: columns in a row, tiles on a roof, bricks in a wall. Counting things made the world easier. When you're done counting you know something that others don't. You see order where others see chaos. There's sense in the nonsense. And you can relax.

James' mother had never liked his habit of counting things. “Nobody does it” she used to say “nobody keeps count of everything. It's not normal. It's not something that people want to talk about. Keep your counting to yourself”. James knew she wasn't completely wrong. Normal people don't mind the chaos. They're confident enough in themselves and in the world to accept the imperfections of life.

It wasn't so easy for James. Every time he closed his eyes, every time he lost sight of a building, or of a person, or of the street, how could he have been sure that they hadn't change? How could he have been sure that they were there, if he couldn't see then?

He couldn't. Nobody could. What he could do was check if something hadn't changed every time he saw it again. So he counted. And everything had worked out fine. Until today.

There were no longer thirteen steps. James had counted them while he climbed up the stairs the first time. And when he climbed it down after noticing that the count stopped at twelve. And again, for the third time, climbing up the stairs again. Up, down. Up, down. Twelve times now.

Twelve times twelve steps.

James knew that if he told anyone what he found out they would have laughed it off. “Sure, buddy, the stairwell lost a step. And I've lost my space ship, have you seen it?” “Get a life, dude. There's more to life than counting steps, you know?”

Normal people don't care about steps, or bricks, or columns, or cracks in the street. They take them for granted. They can't even imagine their number or shape changing for no reason. Oh, sure, they see building being demolished or roads being repaved all the time. But those changes have clear reasons. Clear motives, even. And they take time, and leave behind signs of the work it took to change things.

The step had disappeared overnight, and there were no signs of any public works. The stairwell looked exactly the same as yesterday, except for the missing step.

Nobody can believe that steps can disappear into thin air. Nobody, not even James. And yet he couldn't argue with the truth. Yesterday there were thirteen steps. Today, only twelve. There was no more room for doubts. Something weird must have happened. Somehow, in some moment between yesterday and today, a step of the stairwell had vanished. This was a fact.

"Maybe not" whispered an annoying voice in James' head. "Maybe there have always been twelve steps. Maybe your memory is playing tricks on you. Or maybe you're still asleep. Or you're hallucinating everything, and some nice doctors are feeding you pills to make you sleep in your padded cell"

James shook his head. His memory was fine. Everything else checked out. There were six columns before the Cathedral yesterday. Today, still six. Ten cracks on the pavement between the traffic lights in Pulver Street and the entrance of the metro station. Ten cracks yesterday, and ten cracks today.

Only the number of steps was wrong.

And he was pretty sure he wasn't dreaming, or having a hallucination. He could read every signal in the road, he could feel the cold sting of a November morning breeze, he could hear the frantic beat of his own heart in his ears. He could even smell the flowers of the market, or the stench of the traffic. No dream or hallucination could be so detailed, and get so many details right while only one of them was wrong.

No, this was all real. And terrifying. If someone, or something, could simply delete a step without anyone noticing, and without leaving any signs behind, what else could happen?

What else had happened already?

James shivered and checked his watch. Ten to eight. Five minutes to get to work. The step was still missing, but there was nothing that James could have done about it. He took a deep breath.

"Things are unpredictable, James. You can't control everything" Dr. Venn had a soothing, calm, professional voice. James remembered how long it took for him to open up with him. He was a good therapist, but James didn't think he could have helped him now. Therapy couldn't change the world, only accept it. And nobody can accept the idea that steps can pop away into nothingness and stay sane.

"You need to focus on what you can change. Take control of your reactions. Accept the anxiety. Learn to live with it, to let it scream in your head, but only for a limited time. Give it thirty seconds. Let it get wild. Then tell it that it's over, and that you're taking back control"

Thirty seconds were a long time when a step had gone suddenly missing. There wasn't anything to be done about it, though. Five minutes later James should have checked in and start sorting out files for the District Attorney. Thirty seconds of pure terror were a good price to pay.

"Here we go then. Thirty! (oh god there are only twelve steps what happened to the thirteenth what happened Jesus Christ this can't be real I'm dreaming I'm crazy no I know I'm not).

Twenty! (not possible it can't happen twelve steps today thirteen yesterday this is what's going on and there's no logical reasons no signs of recent works and everything else is fine)

Ten! (one step less but no one cares no one counts them no one loses time counting steps it's only you freaking weirdo and you're probably losing it for real)

Zero. Calm. Peace. Inside, at least. The steps are still wrong. But it's time to get to work. The tribunal is still there. The District Attorney is still inside. They must be. So take it easy. Walk, don't run. Nobody saw you going up and down the stairs. There's no reason to worry about the number of steps now."

Doing things without leaving yourself time to think about them is easy. Before he even noticed James had gone through the metal detector, nodded at the security guard (It was Harry today, of course, it was a Wednesday today, Wednesday morning is Harry's turn) slid his badge over the ID and got to his cubicle.

Two minutes early. A little later than usual, but still not too late. Nothing wrong. Nothing to worry about.

"Jimmy! Jimbo, my boy! You look pale, did you have a good night's sleep?" Frank Matjevic was a friendly boss. He had to be friendly. Rumour had it that he was going to run for office in the next elections. He needed to be seen as a nice guy. Tough on crime, of course, and incorruptible, but also the kind of guy you could have a beer with. James didn't drink, though.

"It's nothing, Frank. Just..." "Just what?" James bit his tongue. He had talked without thinking. That's the bad thing about doing things automatically. You say and do things that can have unwanted consequences.

Oh hell. He had started the sentence. He might as well finish it.

"I was wondering. Are they planning to do something about the stairs?" Not too bad. Just an idle question, nothing crazy about disappearing steps. Good save.

Frank raised his eyebrows. "What's wrong with the stairs?" Plenty of things, thought James, starting with a missing step. But that's not what he said. "They're a bit too steep if you ask me. Someone will slip and hurt himself someday" Frank shrugged. "I don't think that the mayor's office see it that way. But you know what, write this down. It's a good idea, let's not forget it, OK?"

James nodded. No mysterious overnight renovation work that left no signs behind then. Not that he actually believed that theory, anyway. "Here's your usual dose of legal papers. Sort them out before lunch, will you, Jimmy?" Frank smiled as he laid down several folders on James' desk. Frank always smiled. He had a good smile. Pearly whites and tight lips. Ready for a camera.

James flipped through the pages of the first folder. This is work, he thought. Work is good. Work is still the same. Work doesn't have anything to do with disappearing steps. If there had been any disappearing step, of course. It was probably a trick of his memory. Twelve, not thirteen.

"You know what this mean" whispered the annoying voice "Crazy Jimmy, loony Jimmy, you're going cuckoo, losing it. Counting things is bad for you. "

James frowned. He had to shut down the voice. So he buried himself into work.

\*\*\*\*\*

It had been four good hours. Work was a good medicine. There was no time to lose, no time to count things. No time to notice things. But now it was time for a lunch break.

James didn't like lunch breaks. He liked eating alone. Eating with others was uncomfortable. People munch and crunch food. They laugh and eat. They talk and eat. They call people on the phone and eat. Munch, crunch, hello, haha. Haha, crunch, munch, no my office will deal with this later. Crunch. Haha. Bye.

But lunch break also meant talking with Sally. James liked Sally. She was so calm, so sure of herself. She had a pleasant voice. She spoke well. She didn't call him Jimmy or Jimbo. She didn't munch or crunch, and she turned off her phone during lunch break. Talking with her was soothing.

Today things were different. A step was missing. But Sally was always there in the cafeteria. She waved her hand at James. James waved back. "The tuna salad is fine today" "Isn't it always?" Soothing. Very soothing.

They ordered their sandwiches and sat down in the corner. Same place, same time, same lunch. Today was Wednesday, so tuna salad it is.

"They should really do something about the stairs" James shivered. Did Sally just mention the stairs? "What's wrong with the stairs?" Good answer. Always play dumb. Never show the weirdness. Keep it inside.

"We need a ramp. We need to be more accessible, this is 2016." See? Nothing about stupid vanished steps.

"You're right. I'll write it down. It's a good idea, let's not forget it, OK?" Sally laughed. James made a good impression of Frank. He's actually good at copying accents. He's funny sometimes.

"She has a really nice laugh" thought James "Not too loud. Not too long. I like making her laugh".

The waiter brought them the sandwiches. Sally thanked him and grabbed her tuna salad. "She even eats right. No munch, no crunch." "Ask her out now" said the annoying voice "Ask her to see you for coffee. She won't say no, you pathetic dumbass. She's waiting for you to do it"

The annoying voice was right. But not today. Today was the day of the missing step. The time wasn't right. "Maybe tomorrow. Now eat your tuna salad, chat for a while, then back to work".

"Anyway, I think that-" Sally stopped mid-sentence. James frowned. This wasn't like Sally. "You think what?" Sally's jaw dropped. Her eyes opened wide. James leaned towards her. "Is everything OK?"

Sally stayed there, frozen. Horror in her eyes. "Sally?" She raised a hand. Her fingers were missing. Cut. Blood was seeping from the wounds.

James didn't scream immediately. He froze. His brain needed time to process what he saw. And other things were happening very fast. Sally's teeth had become rotten. Black. They were falling out. Her eyes swelled. They turned grey. Her hands was consumed by something. spurts of black blood trickled on James' tuna salad.

"Help...me" whispered Sally while her cheeks shrivelled up like burnt paper. She was crying. Black tears rolled down her shrivelled grey cheeks. A tear landed on James' hand. It burned him. That's when he started screaming. "Help her! Help her"

He grabbed Sally by her shoulders. Her head fell on the floor and cracked open. It was all grey, wrinkled, with no eyes, no nose, no ears. James screamed again. Sally's body fell apart in his hands. It quickly turned to black dust. James's hands were covered with it.

James couldn't stop screaming. The other people in the cafeteria rushed towards him. Joe from Judge Mannings's office grabbed James by his shoulders. "Are you OK, James? What's going on?"

James stared at his hands. They were perfectly clean. He screamed again. "Did you see her? Did you see what's happened to her?" Joe frowned. He looked confused. The other people in the cafeteria seemed worried, concerned. But nobody was doing anything to save Sally.

"She was there! She...she exploded in my hands! She was there!" "Calm down, James. Calm down. Breathe." "She was there and you're not doing anything to save her? Didn't you see? Didn't you see?" "See who?" James shot Joe a desperate stare. "Sally! I was there with her and she...she..."

Joe stood up and helped James back on his feet. "Who is Sally?" James' jaw dropped in horror. "Sally Forrester from the bail bonds office. You've known her for years.. You've dated her cousin, I think. She was sitting there with me. " Joe shook his head. "You were alone, James. You were alone. "

James let out another loud scream and slumped on a seat. Joe whipped out a cell phone. "I think you need some help, James. I'm calling for help." James didn't listen. He was counting the numbers of table legs.

"Eight tables. Four legs per table. Thirty-two legs. Now count them. One, two (she crumpled in my arms oh my god she was BURNT she was BURNT and I felt her tear on my skin and it BURNT me) three four (she dissolved she vanished and Joe said he doesn't know her this doesn't make any sense) five six (she's dead she's dead she's DEAD worse than dead Joe doesn't even remember her) seven eight-"

The last thing James heard before fainting was Joe calling for a doctor. "Doctors can't bring her back, they really can't" thought James. Then the world became black.