Where Did Everybody Go?
Chapter 1

It was a day like any other. It just didn't feel like it. This uneasy feeling caused Ray to think back to his interview with Mimtrin Technologies five years ago on this very date. Question: Do you consider yourself an optimist or a pessimist? Without hesitation, Ray said, "Realist," and saw no need to elaborate. Today, "pessimist" might have been the answer. Even the perfect April 15th Spring weather in Southern California on a Friday afternoon could not swat away that pesky feeling.

Ray is not obsessive, but he is a creature of habit. He orchestrated his morning sequence with precision. There was one glitch in Ray's morning routine today. A new neighbor was moving in across the hall from Ray's eighth-floor apartment. The man was directing the movers from the hallway close to the large utility elevator at the end of the hall. At first glance, he thought it was a business associate, Enrique Martin. The similarities were beyond remarkable. He even called to the man, "Enrique, I didn't know you were moving into this building."

When the man turned, Ray realized he had spoken too soon. The neighbor introduced himself. "Elias Martinez. Nice to meet you." Ray apologized and explained that the resemblance to a colleague was uncanny. The two had a great conversation. Ray informed the new neighbor of the ins and outs of the building. Elias gave the condensed version of being transferred from Mexico City to Los Angeles as VP of Marketing for a publisher of Christian materials.

Elias sheepishly said, "Can I ask you a favor? I know we just met and I don't want to impose." Ray was more than happy to help. "After the movers leave, I need to go to the office and it may be too late before I can return. Some boxes are coming later today. They won't be heavy but they will be bulky. I would ask you to put them in your place, but that would be a big inconvenience. If I give you the extra key, could you just move them into the apartment?"

Ray thought it was strange that Elias would trust him with the key, but then again, they did connect. It was as if they had known one another for a long time. Ray agreed, took the key, and left for work. He now had to mentally reset his customary sequence. This morning's disruption in his routine was nothing major, but the events reinforced his uneasy feeling.

Ray Ferrari is a successful mid-level manager at Mimtrin Technologies' headquarters, a leading tech firm in the Los Angeles area. Even though each day poses unique challenges, Ray's job is straightforward and at times tedious. The last line in his most recent performance review said, "Ray is the most under-employed person in the company. Even though it is not in his job description, he has pointed out flaws in our security. He has advised the cybersecurity personnel on the fixes."

His seventh-floor office had a nice view of the marina and Pacific Ocean when you look past the parking lot full of delivery trucks and vans. The office is pristine. Ten different tech magazines, delivered each month, are organized alphabetically and by month in special holders on his credenza. He keeps only magazines from the past six months because, according to Ray, information older than that is worthless.

Ray enjoys his lunchtime routine. He has a favorite deli and knows most of the people who work there. Every day, Ray orders a club sandwich with extra bacon. There are very few exceptions to that rule. He enjoys spending solitary time away from the office on his favorite bench in the park. As a creature of habit, Ray strolls calmly down the same path to his refuge. The two guards outside the exclusive Kensington Department Store he passed would always smile when they saw Ray coming. "I feel safe just seeing you two on duty," was Ray's daily mantra.

Three short years ago, the casual stroll was uneventful, at least for the most part. Now he needs to walk around ever-growing encampments to avoid unconscious people lying next to used needles or empty bottles of cheap alcohol. Today, he is taking a slight detour because three teens are on his usual path. Ray thought they were looking for trouble. A street preacher had his usual spot. Many people were listening to his rousing sermon. Ray thought, “Good crowd for the Bible Thumper today.”

The park bench for lunch is in the perfect spot. He can see the cityscape on his right and the unending Pacific Ocean on his left. Ray maneuvered to the center of the bench. With his drink perched beside him and the sandwich bag spread to make a tablecloth, Ray began enjoying his club sandwich, which he imagined was a gourmet meal.

Once he finished lunch, Ray liked to read the old-fashioned way – with a book. As he opened the book at the marked page, he heard a scream for help. He looked up to see the three teens mugging an older man while the wife begged for help. Most people just walked quickly away, while others recorded the event. He mumbled to himself, “Glad I didn’t go that way.”

He opened the book again. Just as he started the first sentence, he heard cars honking and the sounds of crumpling metal as crash after crash gridlocked the street. Then the sound of shattering glass. He looked down the street to see that a bus had powered through Kensington's display window.

Ray did a quick scan. He spotted the three teens looking confused. There was no elderly couple. On the other side, the street preacher was gone. The crowd had dwindled to five people, all looking around, trying to figure out the same thing Ray was thinking: **Where did everybody go?**

Then Ray heard a woman crying for help. That is not the sound of a mugging, he thought. Someone was seriously injured. Typically, Ray's avoidance behavior kept him at a distance, but this was somehow different. He felt an unusual sense of urgency.

There were too many crashes to count. Ray ran to the street and spotted the driver, who was calling out for help. The woman was trapped after a delivery van sideswiped her car, pushing it into the back of a truck. The van continued past the car and appeared to adhere to the side of the truck. Ray was laser-focused as he headed to help. He passed by other accidents while attempting to reach the cries.

Ray passed the van that caused the accident. With a glance inside, he saw that the airbags had deployed, but no one was in the vehicle. Ray struggled to get to the woman. Her calls seemed more desperate. Other accidents were only part of the problem restricting Ray's quest. He was being pushed and shoved by the crowd headed for the bus that had crashed into the department store. They were not going to help the people injured on the bus; they were going in to loot the store. Where are the two security guards that he always greeted?

A myriad of runaway vehicles left pedestrians dead and injured. Ray spotted the teens from the park rummaging through the pockets and purses of the lifeless victims. He held himself but wanted to scream, "Has the world gone completely mad?"

Ray didn't understand why he felt compelled to reach the woman trapped in the car. As he finally approached, he saw her injuries. The look on her face projected severe pain. His instinct was to try to stop the bleeding from her head injury. Ray pushed the deflated airbag away as best he could.

"Please, help Jenny," the woman pleaded. She opened her eyes but quickly shut them, hoping the darkness would ease some pain.

“Who is Jenny? Where is she?” Ray was looking frantically around.

“She’s right next to me!” The woman struggled to get the words out, but Ray could hear the panic in her voice.

"There is no one there!" Ray ran to the other side, thinking Jenny might have gotten out. Ray was always one who could control his emotions, but this time his voice stuttered, "Th- the-there is no one here."

The woman struggled but looked over to see an empty seat with the seatbelt still fastened. Ray just stared at the woman. The woman’s hands trembled. She groaned as she turned to see Jenny’s Bible in the empty passenger seat. “My daughter tried to tell me this day would come, but I didn’t listen.” The long sigh that followed pierced Ray’s heart. That abnormal feeling baffled him even more. The woman saw Ray’s confusion.

“The day that Jesus lifts all that believe in Him to Heaven. Today is that day. Now I believe…” She grimaced as she inhaled slowly. “No! Now I know she was right. I know my Jenny is with Jesus. I hope she will forgive me for doubting her. I pray it is not too late for Jesus to forgive me.”

Her eyes met Ray’s. “Please, take Jenny’s Bible.” To appease the woman, Ray leaned in and slowly lifted the Bible from the seat. He raised the book to acknowledge that he had done as requested. Ray was then awestruck as he watched the agony leave her face. She suddenly showed no signs of pain. She seemed at peace. She smiled warmly at Ray, closed her eyes, and then stopped breathing.

Ray thought aloud, "What is going on?" He stared at the Bible in his hand. There was a bookmark. Being an avid reader, he was curious. Even after all that just happened, even with all the confusion around, he opened the Bible to that bookmark. At the top of the page, he saw the name *"Thessalonians,"* which was meaningless to him since he knew little to nothing about the Bible. His eyes moved to the highlighted words:

For the Lord himself will come down from Heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so, we will be with the Lord forever.

Ray had read the verse as he would have read one of his novels. He was about to close the book when he thought out loud, "What? What did that say?" He reread it. He said to the Bible as if it were a person, "No. Can't be." Ray closed the Bible with the bookmark still in place.

The last twenty minutes of Ray's life had been a mental and emotional earthquake. Instead of books falling from shelves, dishes coming out of cabinets, and pictures flying off the walls, Ray's beliefs and paradigms had all come crashing down. People who have been through a significant quake know that they cannot put everything back the way it was. Ray's world just got rearranged. Little did he know that it would never be the same.

Talking things out was one of Ray's problem-solving techniques. Mostly, other people did not hear or, if they did, just ignored those self-talks. "I must get back to the office. Cars are on fire over there. Use the shore route." He saw an opening in the crowd and headed that way. His plan started going wrong right away. People were running in all directions, colliding with one another and tripping over those who had fallen. Ray could not tell if they were running toward someplace or trying to escape.

A man across the street was on one knee while holding his chest. His wife was crying frantically for help. No one stopped. A mother was standing over a baby carriage that must have been the Rolls-Royce of baby carriages. With all the commotion, she checked on her child. With a look of terror in her face, she screamed, "Where is my baby?! I just put him in the stroller. Where is he? Somebody, please help!"

Ray did not feel the same sense of urgency he had for the woman in the car. "Stay focused." He kept true to his quest to reach the office. The noise from planes landing at LAX was a normal, irritating fact of life since the airport was only a few miles away. The sound Ray heard was far from normal. As he blocked the sun with his hand, Ray spotted the culprit. "That jet is way too low," he called out as though someone would hear and do something about it.

After the plane disappeared from view, Ray refocused on his goal. That focus was short-lived when an explosion in the direction of the airport seemed to shake the ground he was on. A volcanic plume of smoke and fire catapulted upwards. Within minutes, there was another.

Ray picked up the pace. His destination and, hopefully, his safety were only minutes away. As Ray was turning the corner on Pacific Street, the sound of metal scraping caught his attention. A cargo ship was grinding against the pillar of the Pelican Island draw bridge. Then the bridge started moaning as though it was in pain. The vessel could not get out of the way as the bridge unfolded in slow motion, taking the vessel's aft with it. Cars and trucks tumbled into the water.

Ray shouted again as though someone would hear, "Where is the tugboat?" Then he caught a glimpse of the usually reliable navigating vessel. It was just drifting. There was no one on board.

Ray finally reached his destination. The courtyard at the side of the building was typically full at this time of the day. People would get their meals from gourmet food trucks and gather in small groups to catch up on the latest gossip. Today was eerily different. The crowd had thinned. The courtyard was almost empty. The people remaining were virtually paralyzed, not knowing what to do.

Freddie's Famous Franks was always a popular mobile venue. Beef, pork, veggie, and soy dogs were truly famous, at least in a three-block radius. Smoke was billowing from the side of the truck. The smell of burning grease and food permeated the air. Then a flash. Flames engulfed the food truck. "Where is Freddie?"

"Get in the office," Ray mumbled. Ray was going against the flow of people flooding out. The building's lobby was comparatively empty. Marianne, the receptionist behind the expansive, speckled granite counter, was on the phone in panic mode. Where is her trusted sidekick,

Carmen? Where is Derik? The massive security guard never leaves his post behind the wall of monitoring equipment.

The elevator's numbers were moving in slow motion. Ray took the option. After winding his way up seven floors of grey, steel steps, Ray's heavy breathing slowed as he walked through the stairwell door into a large room of cubicles surrounded by offices on the outside walls. Several workspaces were empty. Phones were ringing, but no one was answering.

Debbie was the department commander according to the organization flow chart. Her office faces north. Ray always thought that was the best office. No morning or afternoon sun to force in lumens beyond pleasant. Ray approached her office, hoping Debbie might know what was happening. Debbie was one of the few people Ray liked. She always took the time to listen to his ideas on improving systems.

Ray started tapping on the door to signal to Debbie that he was coming in, but Debbie was not there. Ray noticed something highly unusual. Debbie's computer was on, and her mobile phone was ringing to the music of 'God Bless America.' The reflection from the window showed open files on her screen. Debbie was a pro and would never abandon an open screen like that.

Stressed and confused, Ray made it to his office. He reclined in his office chair trying to make sense of the madness. Then he realized that Jenny's Bible was still clutched in his hand. As he tossed the book on his desk, a piece of paper inched out of the pages. Curiosity again got the best of him. The paper acted as a bookmark with several notes. "Daniel 12:1-3." More Bible stuff that again meant nothing to him. Ray fixated on the bullet points.

- Written around 600 B.C.
- Clear Vision God gave Daniel.
- Time of distress – tribulation, severe judgments – used to open eyes and hearts.
- Written in the Book of Life are those to be saved – believers in God and Jesus.
- Everlasting life – eternity in Heaven.
- Disgrace, contempt – for non-believers, haters, evil – eternity in the lake of fire.

Then Ray read the highlighted words in Daniel: *Now at that time Michael, the great prince who stands guard over the sons of your people, will arise. And there will be a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time; and at that time your people, everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued.*

Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awaken, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt. Those who have insight will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of Heaven, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.

Dumfounded, Ray questioned his atheist beliefs, but only for a brief moment. Religion had never been part of his lifestyle. Ray had nothing against those who believe in religion. He could not grasp why so many people were attracted to this abstract system. He reread the bookmarked passage, which did nothing to clear some of the mind fog. Arguing with himself as he regularly did, he muttered, "This is just a coincidence, right? God just snatched people? No. How is that possible? But Jenny was nowhere to be found! All the others disappeared."

Still confused, he tried to reason why pilots, drivers, and tugboat operators disappeared. No one had control, and that led to all the disasters. "I don't know how or why," Ray said as though

there was someone in the room who would be interested. “I understand what I read, but logic tells me this is impossible. Hopefully, someone will figure out where everyone went.”

Ray was abruptly jolted out of his deep thoughts when Duggie and Karen, two members of the analyst team, burst into his office as if being chased by rabid rottweilers. The verbal machine gun started firing before Ray could look up.

In panic mode, Karen asked, “Ray, what are we going to do? Leticia is at a conference in Denver. Debbie just disappeared. Ray, she just disappeared! I was headed for her office. I could see she was in her office. I glanced down at my notes. I looked back up and she was gone!" Duggie had to sit down. His mouth opened as if there was more to say, but no words came out.

Duggie finally spoke. “I was on a video conference call with marketing in New York, Chicago, and Omaha. I was updating Marcie in Omaha on her client’s project. While she adjusted her camera, I opened a file folder. I am talking like for two seconds. I looked back at the screen. She was gone. Her headset was on the desk.”

Ray gazed at Duggie. “Ray, I am not crazy. New York and Chicago participants had the same experience. I called Omaha. Marcie is not there. Lila’s workstation is on but Lila’s not there. Where did everybody go?”

Ray pictured the org chart in his head. Debbie was a VP reporting directly to Chas Jenkins, CIO. Leticia Jefferson had a director title reporting to Debbie. Numbers one and two were out. Ray reported to Chen Huang. He should be the go-to guy at this point.

“I know you’re not crazy. It happened to me.” Ray’s default setting was logic over emotion. He spoke softly to calm the storm. “Karen, I believe your story as well. We don’t know what happened, but I am sure we will get some explanation. In the meantime, we still need to focus on several projects." Ray's expression changed. "Where is Chen?" Duggie told Ray he had seen Chen heading out, but was unsure where he went. “So, at least we know he didn’t disappear.”

Completely out of character, directives started coming from Ray. “You two gather everyone still here for a meeting at the Big Board for a strategy session.” The high-tech whiteboard takes handwritten notes, converts them to typed text, and emails them to stakeholders. Flow charts and diagrams are cleaned up, saved as PDFs, and sent as attachments.

Ray was already writing as people were gathering. He had never taken charge like this, but it looked as though he needed to step up. Ray looked around the office and could find no stragglers. So, he began. “Nobody can explain at this point what just happened. Speculation and rumors will do us no good. Answers will come.” After an extended pause, he added, “Eventually." Because no one on the floor had ever seen Ray in a leadership position, they were all astonished as he took charge.

His awareness of the anxiety level in the room caught people off guard as well. Not known for his tact, Ray’s empathy came as a surprise. “When we break, our priority is to make some calls. First, call your family. If they do not answer, leave a message that you are fine and move on. If you do connect, everyone will have a story. We do not have time to chat.

“Second, we need to call people who are not here. I want you to give Duggie the names of the people that you know are out today. If you have their mobile number, go ahead and call and then update Duggie. If they answer, tell them to get here ASAP. If their mobile phone rings at their

desk, assume they are not returning to work and let Duggie know. If you know they are on vacation or out for a reason, let Duggie know."

Ray continued to give directives. He handled questions and concerns quickly and with ease. Ray wrapped up the meeting with, "We know there is some, well okay, a lot of confusion with what just happened. But we don't know the facts and we don't know what we don't know about what is going on. Assumptions and speculations will just make things worse. What we do know are the tasks at hand for immediate action. Let's stay focused and work on our plan." Everyone headed for their stations. Even though the unease remained high, Ray's unexpected leadership lowered the tension.

Chas Jenkins, CIO, had been monitoring the meeting in the background. He made a beeline for the whiteboard. "It's Ray, right?" Ray nodded. Chas surveyed the action items listed. "I caught most of your meeting. I have already been to the other departments and did not see or hear anything like this." Chas looked around. "Where is Debbie?" Ray answered: vanished. "Where is Leticia?"

"She is at some conference. I don't know where." Chas was astonished by Ray's apparent lack of concern. Ray caught the attention of Leticia's Administrative Assistant and waved her over. "Maria, could you update Mr. Jenkins on what is happening with Leticia? And make a note to give Nancy, his secretary, updates as things change." Ray excused himself and rushed toward Debbie's office.

Chas told Maria, "We don't know where Nancy is. Just send me an internal email." Maria began to think that Ray and Mr. Jenkins were aliens with no emotions. They were way too calm, she thought.

"The problem is, Mr. Jenkins, that all flights have been grounded due to the terrible plane crashes. Leticia sent a short email saying she was trying to rent a car in Denver to drive back. Of course, everybody stranded is trying to rent a car." Maria hesitated with a sigh of contrition. "The truth is that I have no idea where she is right now."

"Denver? I don't know about any conference in Denver." He saw that Maria was at a complete loss. "Alright. Just update me when you hear from her." Chas looked around the office. "Where's Ray?" Two people pointed towards Debbie's office. "This Ray is an interesting character," he whispered. The two gave a wry smile, looked at each other, and nodded in agreement.