

# Chapter 1:

## Just an Ordinary Cloudy Day in December

*“We strive to provide service excellence for those communities that place their trust in our company and are always dedicated to putting our customers first.”*

~ Waste Connections, Solid Waste Industry

Six lives were forever changed on a gray December morning in 1997, in a quiet Vancouver, Washington, neighborhood near the mighty Columbia River. Nearly thirty years later, in the spring of 2025, I interviewed these six in several sessions their memories as sharp as the chill in the Pacific Northwest air.

The morning of those fateful memories dawned overcast, heavy clouds draping the sky like a woolen blanket. No rain fell, but the mist hung thick, leaving a cool dampness on the skin. Traffic hummed softly through the fog, a muted soundtrack to a typical winter day in the Pacific Northwest.

Mari and her husband Gary were active members of Vancouver Community Church, who brought their three children to Sunday School and weekly club activities. Two days earlier, the church buzzed with children’s laughter, the smell of crayons and snacks lingering in the halls. Mari, 31, was a stay-at-home mom, homeschooling her two oldest: Hannah was seven and soon to turn eight, her bright eyes sparkling with curiosity. Caleb was anticipating, his sixth birthday that Saturday. Josiah, three, toddled around, his small feet pattering on the hardwood floors. That

morning, their home in west Vancouver felt warm against the outside chill, the aroma of oatmeal simmering on the stove and faint sunlight struggling through the curtains.

Gary, 32, drove for UPS during the chaotic Christmas season. He started early, the rumble of his truck engine vibrating through his seat as he loaded parcels, the metallic tang of cold air sharp in his lungs. His route wound through rural communities west of Portland, Oregon, each delivery a step in the holiday rush.

Kris Wright, a 23-year-old driver for Waste Connections, began his route in the older west side of town. The neighborhood's modest homes lined rain-slicked streets, their bare tree branches stark against the gray sky. The chill of the steering wheel seeped through Kris's gloves as he navigated his clunky, lever-operated truck, the bitter taste of his morning coffee lingering. Waste Connections, a scrappy \$15 million outfit in 1997, had just acquired the industry's largest player, setting their sights on a public offering that would fuel an almost \$10 billion future by 2025. For Kris, though, the job was about the rhythm of the alleys—gravel crunching under tires, bins clattering into the hopper, and the occasional smile from a kid like the little girl on 'T' Street who brought him a tin of cookies on holidays.

Ron Mittelstaedt, CEO of Waste Connections, was on a business trip, striding through an airport jetway. The metallic clang of footsteps echoed around him, mingling with the faint whiff of jet fuel. His cell phone buzzed in his pocket, insistent. It was Darrell Chambliss, his Executive Vice President of Operations, calling from Vancouver, Washington. Ron's company, formed earlier that year with about 250 employees, was a fledgling force in the solid waste industry, hungry for growth.

Darrell had started his day at the company's newly acquired disposal plant in a rural stretch outside Vancouver, where he was overseeing the transition from the previous owners. The plant thrummed with the low growl of machinery, the sharp scent of waste and diesel cutting through the crisp morning breeze. Darrell answered his phone's insistent ring, "There's been an accident," the dispatcher said.

Neal Curtiss was the pastor of Vancouver Community Church, his role a divine calling that anchored his life. He lived in a cozy home near the church with his large family, their laughter a constant warmth. After a busy weekend of sermons and community events, followed by a restful Monday off, Tuesday marked his return to the office. The scent of freshly brewed tea filled the air, the soft click of his computer keyboard a familiar rhythm. But his plans—perhaps reviewing notes or preparing for evening services—would shatter when his phone rang, vibrating on the wooden desk, with the frantic voice of Mari Malychewski on the line.

Each of these people—Mari with her kids, and Gary on his travels with deliveries, Kris on his route, Darrell at the plant, Ron on his travels, Neal at church—had their own story, unfolding in the misty embrace of Vancouver. None could have known what this ordinary cloudy day held, a moment that would bind their lives forever.