

The man who would be referred to as the shooter leaned into the wood-and-glass door of the Trillium Public Library. He paused inside the vestibule. The lobby was empty except for a library clerk behind the counter. He pushed open the second door and took two steps into the lobby.

“Excuse me, sir. You’ll have to leave your pack here.”

He stared at the clerk. “What?”

“Your pack. You can’t take it into the library. I can keep it behind the counter here.”

“How come?”

“Library rules. Sorry, but that’s the way it is. Your pack will be safe.”

“Huh.”

He pushed a strand of greasy hair from his eyes and surveyed the lobby. He slid one of the pack’s straps over his shoulder and grimaced. The strap got hung up on his coat sleeve, and the pack flipped upside down. Something fell from an open pouch and clattered to the ground. He slowly turned to see what it was.

“Aw, shit.”

A gun was spinning at his feet. He stooped to pick it up, dropping the pack in the process.

The clerk emitted a squeak and disappeared behind the counter.

He stood with the gun, looking confused. Another librarian slipped behind the stacks with a cell phone at her face. He took a step toward the counter and peered over. The clerk was curled in a fetal position. Her eyes opened wide and she squeaked again.

He stood back and turned. His gun was still in his right hand, and as it swept an arc a handful of library patrons ducked for cover.

A librarian at the far end of the children's section frantically motioned a group of kids to follow her. They disappeared into the stacks and a moment later an exit alarm shrieked.

He tried to cover his ears with his left arm and hand, but couldn't.

After a minute the alarm went silent. A woman and child peered through the glass of the outer door. He turned to them and the woman pulled the child out of sight.

A siren sounded in the distance, moving closer. A blur of a patrol car flashed in front of the library windows. The siren dropped in pitch and then stopped. The man stood, his feet frozen to the ground.

He was startled by the sudden appearance of a police officer outside on the sidewalk, and without thinking, shot him in the head.

The sound echoed like cannon fire in the confined space of the library. As the echoes died, all that was left was muted screams and a sobbing sound from behind the counter. A pounding noise came from the magazine section, caused by a man running toward the shooter, who in response swung the pistol and fired another shot. The man sprawled onto the floor, inert.

Outside, a shopper who had been strolling along the sidewalk peered curiously at the fallen police officer, and too late, noticed a bullet hole in the glass door. Another shot and another hole in the glass, and the bystander fell to the ground.

"Well, hell," the shooter muttered, and bent down to pick up his pack. He slung it over his left shoulder, once again grimacing. Still holding the pistol, he pulled open the first door with his left hand,

bracing himself for the cold. He pulled open the second door and had to step over the corpses of the police officer and shopper.

“Drop your weapon and put your hands in the air,” an amplified voice commanded. He looked for the source of the noise and fired. He watched in wonder as the end of a megaphone exploded. Then sixteen shots tore into his body, fired by three groups of police officers crouching behind their cars.

The silence in the Emergency Operations Center lasted a full fifteen seconds.

“Well, that was less than optimal.” Nancy Quayle, Multnomah County Emergency Services Manager, removed her glasses and rubbed her eyes.

We were arrayed in a large square, facing each other, with name tents and binders at each seat.

“I’m not sure how realistic the drill was,” I said. “Simon, wouldn’t you be at the scene instead of nailed to a desk at the EOC?”

Simon Garrett, our police chief, leaned back and nodded. “Damn straight I would. Not sure I could have got in there and disarmed the guy, though.”

“For that matter, Ben, you’d be in some meeting in Portland and the whole thing would be long over before you got to the EOC.” Rachel Armstrong was our assistant city manager. The group laughed, breaking the tension in the room.

“Yeah, but that’s what I’ve got you for,” I said.

“All right,” Nancy said, “let’s go over it again, step by step, and talk about what went wrong and how we could have handled it.”

“Unless I post a guy in every building, I’m not sure how we could have prevented it.” Simon nodded toward Liz Stole, our library director. “And we can’t expect Liz’s staff to take down a nut with a gun.”

“Okay. So is there any kind of training that *would* help the library staff? Let’s talk about that.”

The debrief for the active shooter drill took another hour and a half. When it was over, I hurried back to city hall, knowing I was late for my next meeting. I huddled against the February drizzle. It was only a two-block walk, and like most Oregonians, I rarely bothered to carry an umbrella.

I felt a vague sense of unease over the drill. Not because it had been such a disaster, but because even simulating a shooter loose in our library gave me chills. The copycat phenomenon was a fact, documented with hard evidence. We kept these things low key, but there was a very real possibility that if the Portland newspapers caught wind of the drill and reported it as they felt compelled to do, somewhere someone would open fire on a real crowd of innocent people. Drills for natural disasters, like earthquakes, were okay, but I wondered if drills involving unbalanced or malevolent people did more harm than good.

The meeting was well underway on the third floor. After the wet but clean air outside, the planning conference room seemed stuffy with the presence of a half dozen human bodies. I took an empty seat.

Bess Wilson paused in mid-sentence. Today her gray hair was piled up in a loose bun, and she wore a Portland State Vikings sweatshirt, jeans, and no makeup. Her official title was “Planning Director,” but it didn’t really do her justice. She could draw comprehensive plan maps, draft pages of municipal code, navigate the maze of Oregon land use laws, and manage a small staff of planners and building inspectors. But she was also, as a practical matter, our economic development director, and was in her element when she was working deals.

“Ben, you know Dan Wheatley, right?”

“Sure.” I leaned over and shook the developer’s hand. He didn’t fit the mold: instead of a former homebuilder in jeans and a Carhartt shirt, Wheatley was a compact and somewhat nerdy civil engineer. He pushed his glasses on his nose and introduced his partner, who was sitting next to him, a man named Govind Singh.

“We have a new idea for Trillium that I think you’ll like,” Wheatley said. “Has Bess shared any of this with you yet?”

“Some. You’re actually thinking of building some decent-sized lots in a city in Oregon. What are you, some kind of radical nut?”

He chuckled. “I guess so. Half acre to three quarter acre lots, to be specific. I know I could make more money chopping them up, but this site just begs for spacious lots and nice homes. Every site will have a view of both the Willamette River and Mount Hood. Many will even get the Portland city lights.”

I looked at city attorney Pete Koenig. His shirt was ruffled and his tie looked like he bought it in the 1920s. He anticipated my question before I asked it, and gave me a lopsided grin.

“Yes, our minimum density is three homes per net acre. So the lots have to average, at most, 14,500 square feet. What Dan is proposing is lots at between 22,000 and 33,000 square feet. But he thinks he has a solution.”

Wheatley slid a large plat map toward me. “The key is that you have a *minimum* lot size of 7,500 in this zone, but no maximum size. I just have to have at least three lots per acre, on average. So over here—” he pointed with a mechanical pencil— “the land drops off pretty quickly. I don’t want to put houses there anyway. Too expensive to build, and they would louse up the views for the other lots. So for every 22,000-foot lot up the hill, we’ll plat a 7,500-foot lot down here. For every three-quarter acre lot, we’ll plat a couple of seventy-five hundreds. We’ll do it so the math works; the city gets three lots per acre.”

“Except that you really won’t build homes on all those lots, right?” Bess asked.

Wheatley blinked. “Well, they would be buildable. It would be possible to put a home on each one.”

I stared at the preliminary plat map, imagining the homes that could be built in a development like that. They would be country estates, but only twenty minutes from downtown Portland. We would get doctors and lawyers to move over from Lake Oswego. Our population had topped 50,000, which was a fairly good-sized town for Oregon, and I didn’t see a compelling need to cram more people in than we had to. A subdivision with a couple dozen million-plus homes would do more for our tax base than acres of warehouses. And it wouldn’t put a burden on services. These folks wouldn’t even use the local schools; they would drive their little dears to Catlin Gabel, Jesuit, or Oregon Episcopal School.

His associate, Singh, seemed to guess what I was thinking. “These will certainly become the premier home sites in Trillium, if not in the entire Portland area. They will significantly add to the city’s assessed value.”

“You’re probably right,” I said. “So would you stub out utilities to those phantom lots?”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Bess’s associate planner, Vincent Spinter, cringe at my use of the phrase, “phantom lot.”

“No,” Wheatley said. “We would do the subdivision in phases. Those lots would be in phase two.”

“Ah. Phase two.”

Wheatley had done one previous subdivision in Trillium. The lots had been small, but the lack of yard space was offset by a nice neighborhood park that Wheatley had put in the heart of the subdivision. His application materials had been so meticulously prepared that Bess had said she would give him blanket approval to build anything else he wanted in Trillium, if she legally could. But Oregon land use laws required that we treat him like the lowest

common denominator, and put him through the gauntlet of reviews and approvals.

“So how will the folks who buy the big lots know that you or someone else will never build on the small ones? It would seem like a trailer park in the middle of the country club.”

“Uh, there are ways to provide that assurance,” Wheatley said.

“CC&Rs, right?” I looked at Pete, who nodded.

“The city doesn’t get involved in covenants, conditions, and restrictions,” he said. “They’re purely private contractual arrangements. But the homeowners’ association can certainly enforce them.”

“So what do you need from us?” I asked Wheatley.

“Um, nothing, really. It will take me a couple more weeks to complete the land acquisition and to assemble all my application material. But I’m not looking for any variances, so as far as I can tell, this wouldn’t even need to go to the planning commission.”

“Yep. The draft plan looks like it meets all our requirements,” Bess said.

Associate Planner Spinter rolled his eyes but didn’t say anything.

The meeting drew to a close, and we filed out of the conference room. In the lobby, I shook Wheatley’s hand, and wished him luck. And something seemed strange to me; I had to ask.

“Mr. Singh, aren’t you a top executive with Intel?”

His dark eyes bored into me.

“I was,” he said. “I don’t know about executive, but I headed up a design engineering group when I left the company.”

“Okay. So just out of curiosity, why are you interested in a subdivision in Trillium?”

He laughed. “I am an investor, pure and simple. This one seems like a good investment. Don’t you think so, Mr. Cromarty?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“In addition, my wife and I might be interested in living in one of these homes. I hear you have a very good school district.”

“Yes, we do.”

The elevator door opened. As they left, I wished them well.

Back in my office, I returned a few phone calls. The Chamber of Commerce president was working on a grant application for their visitor center, and wondered if I would write a letter of support to the county. A resident was upset at the city because the code enforcement officer had told her she needed to get her junk car off the driveway. Jake Wildavsky, our public works director, needed to schedule a meeting with me to discuss a messy personnel issue. The normal sort of stuff for a city manager.

But it was the variety that made the job so interesting. Our city provided lots of services, passed laws, operated a municipal court, and had agreements and partnerships with a wide range of governmental, nonprofit, and for-profit private organizations. Every morning I would come in to work thinking I knew what my day would be like, and I was always wrong. Evening always seemed to come too soon. After twelve years in the job, that was a good sign.

Around 5:30 I shut down my computer and prepared to leave. It was a rare evening with no night meetings, and I looked forward to the time at home with my family.

The phone rang, and I was tempted to ignore it. But I picked up.

“Ben, you might want to join me on this one,” Chief Garrett said. “One of our bus drivers just ran over a pedestrian. And this time it isn’t a drill.”