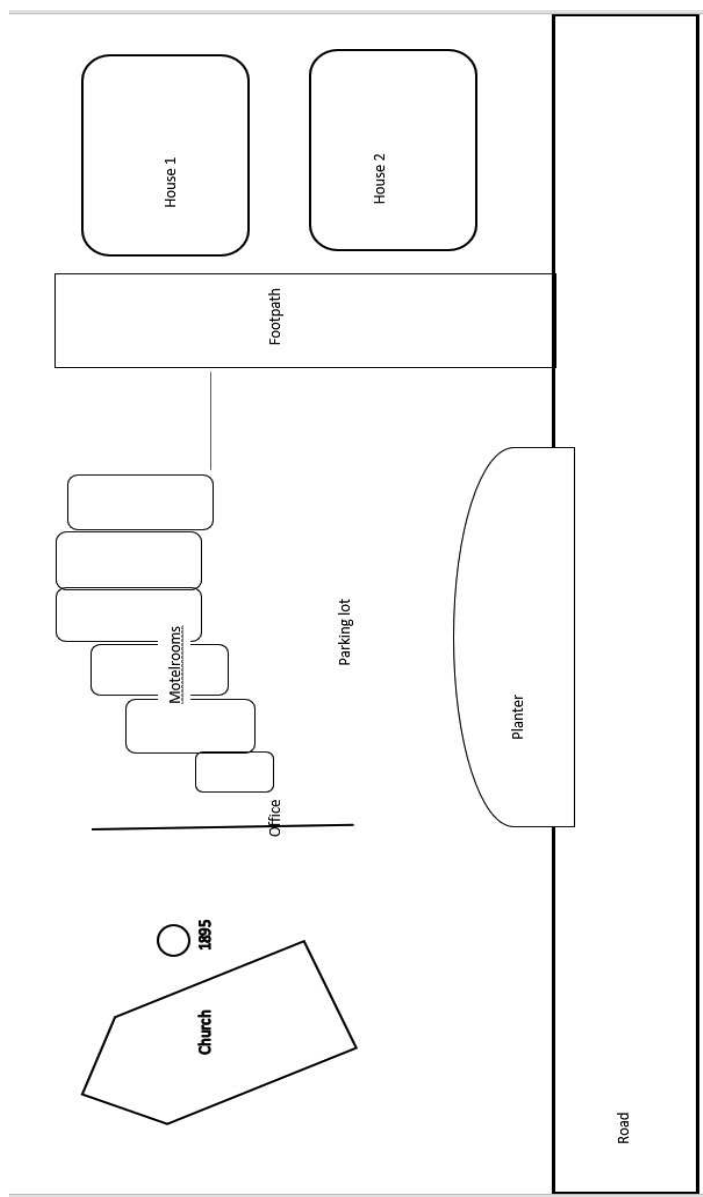


Buried Secrets
An August Smith Adventure



1895

Father Patrick O'Connell was very pleased. The construction of his brand-new church was going well. Yes, two more weeks and everything would be ready for the first mass. Suddenly, there was a shout from outside. Despite being an old man, O'Connell managed to run out of the church. There was a group of people standing a bit further on. He quickly joined them and saw that they were all looking at a hole.

"What happened?" He asked.

"I don't know, father," One of the on-lookers said. "Frederick went to get some wood and he just...vanished, sir."

"Frederick?" O'Connell yelled into the hole. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Father. But I think you should come down here, sir."

"Stay put, Frederick. I will be down shortly."

"Yes, sir."

They found a ladder, which they lowered into the hole. Two muscled men held the ladder, while O'Connell climbed down. He found himself in a cave. Frederick had fallen into the cave when a section of the roof had collapsed.

"Where did this cave come from?"

"I believe I know that, sir," Fred gestured towards the walls.

"Somebody carved it out a long time ago."

O'Connell studied the walls and realized that Fred was right. There were clear tool marks. But some pieces of the walls were natural.

"Actually, I believe they only made it bigger. But why?"

"Only the dear lord knows, sir. And in his infinite wisdom, he will probably not tell us. For what's in there, is probably not meant for us."

O'Connell nodded, then headed deeper into the cave. There was a wall with an opening. What was beyond, was beyond anything he had ever seen.

A Few Months Ago

August Smith rang the bell and waited for his mother to open the door. He was standing outside his parents' house, with his arms full of groceries. Because of that, he couldn't use the keys. His mother opened the door and he put the groceries down in the kitchen. He was still getting used to this new house. It had only been three weeks since his parents had moved in. They had bought it with money they had gotten from their insurance company after their farm in Louisiana had burned down. Because most of their stuff had been lost in the fire, the place was rather empty. But they were slowly gathering new stuff. Which was giving his mother something to do, while his father worked as a security guard at Diamond Studios.

"How is it going?"

"Very well. I found a table, two chairs and a couch."

He nodded. His mother seemed to be adjusting well.

"How about your apartment?"

"We're all set up."

In the case, we meant August and his girlfriend April Tanaka. August was an actor/stuntman in-training and April was studying to become a nurse. He was caucasian with green eyes and blond hair, while she was Asian with brown hair and brown eyes. Together, they were preparing for the arrival of a baby. Because before he had gotten together with April, August had been seeing July Jones. For reasons that were too painful to remember, the relationship had ended and she could not help raise the baby. So, as soon as the child was born,

August and April would take it in. But to do that, they needed a place. Fortunately, his parents had bought a house with a walk-up basement they didn't need. It was fully finished, so it had only needed furniture. They were also planning to turn the attic into an apartment, which they would rent out to somebody. But that would have to wait.

"Excellent," His mother said. "Nervous?"

The question caught him off guard. He and his mother had never been close, so it seemed very out of character for her.

"Yes, very nervous."

"Good luck."

"Thank you."

He gave her a nod and headed for the door. August gave his mother one last look and then walked out.

The thing that had made him nervous, was the viewing of a large piece of land he had bought. It was 9.37 acres several hundred meters outside of a town called Bullhorn in the state of Indiana. But because it was so far away, all he had seen was photos. And now he was going to see it in person. He met his friend Marcus O'Neill outside the house. Marcus was coming with him on the trip.

"Ready to go?" Marcus said.

"Ready."

They were going to the airport in a taxi. Neither had seen any reason to pack, so they simply got in and it peeled out.

Bullhorn, Indiana

August looked at his piece of land. It was grassland, with a couple of trees. And it was clean. As for Bullhorn, it was a really small town. Once, in the 1930's, it had been rather nice. But after the 1960's, things had crashed. Now, it was just a

church, a motel and two houses. The houses and motel dated from 1975, leaving only the church – which had built in 1895 – from the original settlement. They had taken a look at it, before heading out here. The priest, Robert Hendricks, had been very welcoming to them. Hendricks lived in one of the town's two houses, while Karen Rodriguez – the owner of the motel – lived in the other.

“So?” August said. “What do you think?”

“It’s a good a piece of land. But it’s in the middle of nowhere. What are you going to build on it?”

“I haven’t figured out that part yet.”

August leaned on the rental car they used to get here. He thought his friend was spot-on with that assessment. Bullhorn was located miles from anything. And the town was not on the way to anything important. Which explained why the town had spiraled down in the end. Before, there had been a petroleum well. Alas, it had dried up in 1963. So, what could he build here? He had no intention of moving to Bullhorn. The land had been an investment. But who would buy a piece of land out here? He would really have to think the one over.

Present Day

It had been three weeks since July had given birth and August and April had taken charge of the baby, Andromeda Julia Smith. Or A.J., as August and April called her. They had his parents - Dennis and Andrea - to help them, but it was still a steep learning curve. So August grabbed sleep whenever he could. At the moment, that meant sleeping on the couch in Angus Janssen’s office. Janssen was the Chief Writer for Diamond Studios.

“Getting some shuteye, August?” Angus said as he walked in.

“I love A.J very much, but getting a full night of sleep....”

“...Forget that for the next couple of weeks.”

“How long it take your daughter to sleep full nights?”

“To long,” He padded August of the shoulder. “Sleep while you can.”

He tried to sleep, but suddenly there was a noise. So he sat up and rubbed his eyelids.

“So much for sleep. What is that?”

“Today is the fourth. It’s the start of the remodel, remember?”

August moaned and opened his eyes. They had both known it was in the works for two months, but he had forgotten that work had begun today. Several months ago, a serial killer had haunted the studio. He had used a network of hidden rooms and passages called The Web. After some consideration, it had been decided to remodel the whole studio. There were twelve stages on one side of the street. And one across it. The stage across the street had once been Xerxes Films. But the owner had been murdered by the serial killer. He had left Xerxes Films to Ruth and Alexander Mackenzie, who were the owners of Diamond Studios. In effect, the two companies had merged after his death. The studio remodel was being done for several reasons. The new studio would be more energy efficient. And the elimination of The Web would make it more secure. But it would also leave them with two empty stages. The plan was to move the two biggest shows they had inherited from Xerxes Films to those stages, giving them a chance to take their production to the next level. It would also give their smaller shows resources to expand. Alas, none of that would help August sleep.

“Au! I’d forgotten,” He got up. “Don’t take this wrong, but I’m going to find another place to crash.”

“Go sleep, young man.”

August smiled and walked out. He knew the perfect place to hide.

Stage 13

August walked into the former Xerxes Films lot. He made his way to the supply room. But this was no ordinary supply room. For this supply room had a hidden door, which lead to a hidden room. Said room had once been the office of a legendary film maker called Wolf Stonelayer. Since his death, it had been largely abandoned. But there was a hammock where he could sleep. He made his way to a bookcase at the far end of the room. August pulled on one of the books and the bookcase slid aside. Beyond was a staircase which led into the office. As he made his way down, he noticed the place had been cleaned. He made a mental note ask about it, but that would have to wait. For now, he needed some shuteye. So he climbed into the hammock and closed his eyes.

A Day Later

He had slept for an hour, before being woken by studio employee Alexander Dyson, who had send him to back to the studio to record his last scene of the day. When that was done, he had driven home. He did so in Kurt Eriks' Jeep. Eriks had been the Head of Security for Diamond Studio when August had first arrived. But since then, he had been hired by a Private Military Contractor. And because his new job came with a company car, he had a Jeep to spare. August - on the other hand - had recently gotten his driver's license. But he did not have a car to drive. So Kurt had given August his ride to use. With Kurt gone, his old job had been taken over by none other than Dennis Smith, a.k.a. August's father. And he had hired Alexander Dyson – who had been a soundman before – as a new member of the security team. Which was how Dyson had

known about the secret room over at Xerxes Studios. Apparently, his father had plans for Stonelayer's former office. He had gotten home to find April feeding A.J. She looked exhausted, so he had taken over. And now he was feeding AJ again. It was a Sunday and she really need to sleep in. And he was also sorting through the mail. It was mostly junk mail, but there was one thing that drew his attention. It was a letter from Father Robert Hendricks. He put it aside and finished feeding A.J. her bottle. Then he put her down in her cradle. He sat down next to her and opened the letter. Apparently, some bureaucrat wanted to relocate the locals to the nearest town and bulldoze Bullhorn. And he was their only hope. August sighed. It wasn't as if he didn't have a lot on this plate already.

A Conversation and A Decision

That afternoon, his parents' living room was rather crowded. His parents were there, as were April's parents – technically, there were here adoptive parents, but that was not the point – and the Mackenzies. Completing the gathering were John and Maggie Wallace. John was the studio Medic and Maggie was the head of the special effects department. When April and August needed help with AJ, this was the group of people they asked first. They had all read the letter from Father Hendricks. "So?" August said. "What should I do about this?" "It's not your fault," Dennis said. "You are not responsible for the decision made by some Indiana paper-pusher." "And you have AJ to think of," Andrea Smith said. "But..?" August said. "And I know there's a but. I can tell from the tone of your voices." Andrea and Dennis exchanged looks. Dennis shrugged and smiled.

“Okay. We’ll support you if you want to go.”

“Ruth? Alexander? What are your opinions?”

“I agree with your parents,” Ruth said. Alexander nodded in agreement. August looked at the others. From the looks on their faces, they all felt the same. August leaned back in his chair and thought about it. But it was like he had a snowstorm inside his head. And he couldn’t see what to do. The front door opened and April came in. She was carrying AJ in her arms.

“She’s sleeping like a brick,” April said as she sat next to August. “So, how are we doing, decision wise?”

“I have no idea what to do,” August sighed. “I’m only twenty! We have AJ to worry about. We have jobs!” He sighed again.

“I can’t just go running off to Indiana.”

“But...”

“What makes you think that there’s a but?”

“The tone of your voice. Whenever you use that tone, there’s a but.”

John and Maggie chuckled at the exchange, as did Dennis.

“You sound like us on a bad day,” John said.

“And we’ve been married for ten years,” Maggie added.

August shook his head. They had been together for a couple of months now and she was really figuring him out.

“But one day AJ will be grown up. And I don’t want to have to tell her that I could have saved Bullhorn, but didn’t. I’m her dad and part of the job description is setting a good example,” He paused. “So....I’m going.”

“I’ll come with you,” April said.

“What about AJ?” Ruth asked. “Are you going to leave her here?”

“I don’t think such a long trip would be good for her.”

“We can take her,” Diana – April’s mother – said. “I have steady hours and two teenagers who can pitch in. Not to

mention Miss Jankowski, our upstairs neighbor. She's raised fourteen boys and eight girls, so she knows her way around babies."

August looked at April, who nodded her approval. If she had rejected the proposed solution, so would he have.

"Okay," He bit his lower lip. "So, what do I do with the land?"

"Yes," Dennis said. "I did the math and 9.37 acres is almost 38000 square meters. That is a huge chunk of land."

August thought about that. He would need a good plan for that land before he got to Bullhorn. Or otherwise that Indiana bureaucrat would still bulldoze the town. And he had an idea where he could go for help.

The River

Claus 'Big C' Paulson sat behind his desk and read the latest report. So, everything was going as planned. But if there was one thing he had learned after thirteen years of being a spook, it was that plans could fall apart in a split second. They had managed to bury the criminal charges against August Smith. And Father Hendricks had send the letter. Hendricks was one of three people outside the agency who knew it existed. The other two were the President of the United States and the President of the Russian Federation. Not that there was much to know about. The agency was called The River. It had four stations of three agents each: One in Moscow, one in Washington, his station here in Los Angeles and – this was where the plot thickened – Bullhorn, Indiana. It meant that everybody else thought the FBI had swept the charges under the rug. He closed the last folder and leaned back.

“Hope you can handle this, kid,” He said. “Because once you cross the yellow tape, you can’t go back. And things can get pretty weird out here.”

Before he had joined The River, Big C had been a police officer in a small town in Florida. And the things he had seen since....

“Yeah, beyond the yellow tape is one weird world.”

But joining had been the right thing to do. He had been certain of that back then and he was still certain now. Alas, it was also tons of work. So he got back at it.

The Other Side

Special Agent Brent Ryder had a problem. He was sitting in his office, facing a whole bunch of inconsistencies in the papers in front of him. Some were in Los Angeles Police Department reports and some in FBI reports. According to the paperwork, August Smith had been cleared of all the charges by the FBI. Which was impossible, because he was the Special Agent-In-Charge of the Los Angeles office. And if the FBI had done what the papers said they had done, it would have need his autograph. But he hadn’t seen any of the paperwork. It set off alarms in his head.

“Who is Claus Paulson?” He paused. “And what is he up to?” He had assigned Special Agent Thomas Farrell to research Claus Paulson. The man was a disaster in the field, but his research skills had been key to solving thirteen cases in the two years that he had served in the Agency. There was a knock at the door.

“Enter,” Ryder said.

Farrell came in. He was carrying a folder. Ryder leaned back and studied the man. Farrell was in his late twenties, with blue eyes and short, blond hair.

“Morning, boss. I have good news and bad news. So which do you want first?”

“The good, please.”

“I’ve finished my search for Claus Paulson.” The look on the man’s face told him that he wasn’t going to like the next bit.

“The bad news is what I found.” He put the folder on the desk.

“He’s assigned to the Directorate of Intelligence. And apparently, he’s working on something classified above both our pay-grades.”

“Great, just great,” Ryder sighed. “Thank you, Agent Farrell.” Farrell left and Ryder got a feeling that this affair was far from over.

As Farrell headed back to his office – he had three cases that needed research – he was observed by two Special Agents.

One was called Tyler and the other was called Anders.

“What did he find, Tyler?”

“Nothing, Anders, absolutely nothing.”

“Good,” Anders paused. “Do you think this Paulson will lead us to it?”

“Yes, I believe he will. It is only a matter of time.”

“Excellent. I will report this development to H.”

Tyler nodded. This development would please the right people and – if it led to what they hoped it would – probably get him promoted. But for now, there was other work to be done. He went back to his desk and set to it.

August’s Plan

August knocked on the door of Megan Richards’ dressing room.

“Enter.”

He made his way inside. Megan was rehearsing her lines.

“Hello August,” She put down the script. “What’s up?”

He explained what was happening over at Bullhorn.

“Now, isn’t your uncle Tom an architect?”

“Absolutely. He’s the one who designed the remodel for the studio. Do you want me to ask him to come up with a design for your land?”

“Yes. I’m going to need something to get that Indiana bureaucrat off their backs. And it had better be good.”

“Well, uncle Tom is top notch. And he’s also a very nice guy. I’m sure I can convince him to do it for free, August.”

“Thank you.”

He gave her a nod and walked out. His instincts told him that Megan would come through for him. But they also said that a plan would not be enough. No, he would need a little something extra. So he needed to make another stop.

An hour later, August was designing something himself. He had used a computer at the studio to check his savings account. And now he was putting things he knew he could buy with that money together to make something bigger. If he was going to convince the bureaucrat he had plans for his land and Bullhorn, he would have to build a camp there. So he was putting it together on the computer. This one was in John Tyler’s office, which was the closest to the Flowers’ set. There was a knock at the door, making him look up. It was John Tyler.

“I hate to interrupt, but you’re needed on set.”

“Right, back to my real job.”

He saved the file and logged out. Then the two of them headed out. As they walked, they were joined by a young boy. He had blue eyes and red hair. August figured he was about eleven years old.

“Hi, uncle John! This place is cool.”