

Chess Games in Cairo
An August Smith Adventure

Funeral

August Smith was crying his eyes out. Two of his best friends had died.

Four years ago, at age nineteen, he had left the farm where he had grown up. And made his way to the city of Los Angeles. Once there, he had found a job at a movie and television company called Diamond Studios. A lot had happened since his first day there. First there had been a serial killer, who had roamed the neighborhood of Hollywood. This had been followed by a Mad Taxi Bomber and a land dispute over a town called Bullhorn, Indiana. During these crazy, roller-coaster, years he had become the father of a beautiful daughter called Andromeda Julia. He had also found somebody to share life with. Her name was April Tanaka. She was not Andromeda Julia's, or AJ's, biological mother. But she didn't care. April loved AJ as if she was her own flesh and blood. April and AJ were not the only people whom had entered his life. The people at Diamond Studios were like a family. A crazy, dysfunctional family that was in serious need of psychological therapy. But still a family. At the head of said family had been Ruth and Alexander Mackenzie. Two days ago, their housekeeper had found them. They had passed away peacefully in their sleep. The announcement had hit the studio staff like a punch to the gut. In fact, it had been so shattering to morale that production had grounded to a halt. Today, the studio was nearly empty. Everybody – from the janitor to biggest star – were here to say goodbye. The only people not in attendance were the security staff. They had wanted to come, but apparently that would have created issues with the studios insurance. So August was far from alone as he cried. He watched as the coffins were slowly lowered into the graves. The priest was talking but August didn't hear the

words. Finally the funeral was over and the crowd began walking away. August's legs felt like lead as he walked. After what felt like forever, they reached the car. He was aware that there were other people around him, but he was too tunnel-visioned to notice who they were. He sat in the back. His heart was heavy and his body was exhausted, so he closed his eyes and fell asleep.

Resuming Work

Three days had passed since the Mackenzies had been buried. Today was Monday and it had been decided that production would resume this week. Making the decision had been job the Council of Elders. The first member of Council was the Studio Accountant, Marcus O'Neill. On Saturday, he and Angus Janssen had emailed all the employees and asked them to come in today. Janssen was member number two of the Council, on account of him being the Chief Writer. At the moment, O'Neill and Janssen were headed for The Shoebox. Said room was called that because it was tiny. It was from here that the studios PA system was operated. O'Neill stuck his head inside the booth.

"Nice announcement," He began. "Come on, we need to go."
"Right," Said the person inside the booth. "Time to get this over with."

Maggie Wallace was Head of Make-Up and the third member of the Council. She had been the one to use the PA system to break the news that production was resuming. The three of them headed for Ruth Mackenzie's old office. When they got there, the last two members of the Council were already in the room.

"Dennis, John," O'Neill said.

"Morning," John Wallace said. "Good speech, honey."

Maggie sat down next to John, who was her husband. He was also the Studio Medic. Completing the Council was the Head of Security, Dennis Smith. It was no coincidence that he and August shared a last name, as they were father and son. As the ground gathered, August was making his way through the main gate. His heart was still heavy, making the last three days feel like an eternity. Yet, seeing his father made him crack as small smile. He found a place to sit in the now-crammed office.

“Morning, dad.”

“Morning, August,” Dennis began. “So why are we here?”

“Mister Harris is going to open the will,” Marcus O’Neill said.

“He should be here soon.”

Samuel ‘Sam’ Harris was one of the senior lawyers at Harris, Anders and Jones. The firm had been the legal representative of Diamond Studios since it had been founded. As if on cue, Harris arrived. Despite being a senior partner in the firm, he hated wearing suits. Instead, he wore a jeans and Hawaii shirt. Which did not go well with his Caucasian skin and short, brown hair. Not to mention the pair of really ugly sunglasses he was wearing. But he stalwartly ignored anybody who pointed that out.

“Stop calling me Mister Harris,” He began. “It makes me feel like I’m three-hundred years old.” ~Instead of the thirty years I am.~ Harris thought. Now....” He sat down in Ruth’s old chair. “...let’s get this over with.”

“Okay,” Marcus said, his tone making it clear that he’d rather have a root canal than be here.

Harris took off his sunglasses, revealing his green eyes. Then he put a folder on the desk and opened it. The first page of the document inside had a list of names. These were the people whom had to be there when the will was read. Everybody on the list was already in the office, so Harris could get started

right away. Which was fine with him. He had liked the Mackenzies and dealing with their will was not fun.

“Ruth and Alexander have three children, two daughters and one son. None of the children want to take over running the studio. So they intended to leave the studio to Robert Dillion, the owner of Xerxes Studios. But Robert Dillion died before they did, so we’re on Plan C now.” He paused. “Which is as follows...eighty percent of the shares are now the property of mister Kurt Eriks. Ten percent go to you, Mister Janssen. It says...” Harris chuckled. “...to consider this as a pay raise, you old fart.”

This got a laugh from the entire office, after which Sam continued to read.

“The remaining ten percent is split into two chunks of five percent. The first is for Maggie and John Wallace, while the other is for Marcus O’Neill.”

“Is there more?” August asked.

“Their house is to be sold, the proceeds to be donated to the Los Angeles Police Department for the youth outreach program. And finally, Francis DeMarco’s contract is secured until 2035.” DeMarco owned a food truck and was the studio caterer. “That’s it.” His task done, Harris closed the folder and left the office. August leaned back and took a deep breath. Diamond Studios was entering a new period. And he had a feeling that everything would be different.

Two days later, Kurt Eriks was headed for the Diamond Studios lot. Eriks had once been the studio’s Head of Security. That stint had ended when he had been offered a job by a private military contract. ~Which was not all it was cracked up to be.~ He reached the main gate and signed in. The security guard gave him a nod.

“Welcome back, sir.”

“Thank you.”

“So what brought you back ?”

“The Fax,” Eriks said, causing the guard to make a face.

“Don’t ask.”

He continued inside. What he did not tell the guard was that Sam Harris had faxed him the Mackenzies will. So he had quit his PMC job and headed here. Walking onto the studio lot felt like coming home after a long vacation. But the lot was not entirely as he remembered it. Around the time of the Mad Taxi Bomber’s attacks – a little over two years ago - it had been decided to remodel parts of the studio to make it more secure. Kurt looked around and realized that said remodel was now done. While the buildings looked the same on the outside, they had undergone major work on the inside.

“Not bad,” he said with a smile. “Not bad at all.”

He made his way into the office and took the elevator to the top floor. It was one of the few areas of the studio that remained unaltered. And yet, the offices that had belonged to the Mackenzies were very different from how they had been the last time Kurt had gone inside. Marcus O’Neill’s old office had been a broom closet with a desk. Now he was moving into Alexander’s office. Before he could do that he needed to organize Alexander’s stuff. Which was no easy feat.

“Hi, Marcus,” Kurt said. “How is it going?”

“It’s going to take ages to organize all this,” Marcus said.

“Alexander was great at making movies and accounting, but organizing his office...,” He shook his head. “...not so much.”

“Good luck.”

Kurt walked into Ruth’s office. The place was a mess, with papers all over her desk. There were scripts, notes, photographs, drawings and all sorts of other junk. He sighed at the sight. ~This is WAY too much work to do on just three

hours of sleep.~ He had taken a train to get here, spending most of the trip cancelling his rent and arranging for his stuff to be shipped to Los Angeles. There had also been the issue of arranging a hotel room near the studio lot. So he had not been able to sleep on the train. It arrived four hours ago. He had managed to get three hours of sleep, before getting ready to head here. ~And here I am.~ This was going to be a long day.

Bert and Dakota

Bert Karens looked in the mirror and nodded. His uniform was looking good. Now all he needed was for his partner to show up. Karens was a young cop. At the start of his career, he had been sucked into the Mad Taxi Bomber case. It had been a crazy start of his days in Law Enforcement. He had nearly been killed during the Bomber case. In the years since, his career had been uneventful. Which was fine with Bert.

“Here’s to another day of boredom,” He said while smiling at the mirror. “The less action, the better.”

He looked around his apartment. All of his stuff was packed up in boxes. When he had been wounded during the Bomber case, he had ended up in a hospital. There, he had met a beautiful Australian nurse called Dakota Harris. She had dazzling green eyes, impossibly soft Caucasian skin and long, blond hair. In the years since, he and Dakota had fallen in love. Two weeks ago, they had decided to move in together. As soon as that was done, he would ask her to marry him. He headed for the door.

“Headed to work?”

He turned to see Dakota standing in the doorway to his bedroom. She was only wearing a white T-shirt. They had spent the night together, but he had still managed to get some sleep. His eyes wandered to her hair. Yesterday, she had gone

to a beauty parlor. She had come back with a pixie cut. It was good look for her, but he was still getting used to it. He pushed the thoughts aside.

“Yeah, meeting the new Captain.” His older superior, Captain Anna Ryder had been promoted to leadership of the LAPD’s Counter Terrorism Group. “He, or she, is coming in for the first time today.”

“Still no idea who you are getting?”

“Nope, the brass is being very tight-lipped about it,” He looked at himself in the mirror. “But you can bet that whoever it is, they won’t be happy if I am late.”

He kissed her on the cheek, then walked out. His apartment was on the fourth floor, so he had plenty of stairs to walk.

When he was roughly halfway, he heard a voice.

“Hurry up, Bert,” A female voice said. “Or we’ll be in serious trouble.”

Bert bolted down the stairs. His partner was Anita van de Meer. During the Bomber case, she had been a cadet. But she had graduated the Academy since then and been assigned as Karens partner. Together, they rode in a really old patrol car that they called Erica. He found Anita leaning on Erica.

“You’re driving today,” Van de Meer began. “And you’d better step on it.”

“Okay,” Karens said. “Get in and hold on.”

The two of them got in and Bert floored it.

Hetty Smith and Karl Newton

Henrietta ‘Hetty’ Smith walked into her office and sat down at her desk. A couple of years ago she had been working for a company called Smith and Wallace. They made bicycle parts. Then she and Marcus O’Neill had discovered a secret program called Project 1422. There had been an incident after that. The

company had not had any solid proof of her involvement, but they had sensed enough to fire both her and her assistant. Her assistant, Karl Newton, still was that. After losing her job, she had found a new one at Robinson, Thompson and Wilkins. It was a tiny law firm of three lawyers. They had needed an accountant and had hired Hetty for the job. In the time since, the company's client list had tripled. Besides hiring two junior lawyers, her bosses had also allowed her to hire an assistant. She had used that permission to rescue Karl from a fast food restaurant. Now, the two of them were working on the backlog of bills and other paperwork. Said backlog had been caused by the company mainframe being down for three days. It had kept them from working. And now they had to catch up.

"This is going to be a long day," Karl said from behind his desk.

"Yes, it sure is."

The two of them got to work.

Expansion

Kurt Eriks had needed three days to read up on all the projects and then another four talking to people and visiting all the sets. Now, he was all caught up, and he was glad to find that things were going well at Diamond Studios. After a bit of pondering, he had left the Council of Elders in charge of things at the Los Angeles complex as he headed for Bullhorn, Indiana. Bullhorn was home to Emerald Productions, which was the animation branch of Diamond Studios. It was one of two major employers in the town. The other was a company called Aranov Industries. Aranov had begun as an experimental nuclear power station. Originally, it had only provided Bullhorn with power, but since then it had also become the power source for the towns of East Hope, New Lincoln and

Lower Bullhorn. East Hope and Bullhorn were both old towns that had been founded because of mining. When the mines had dried up, East Hope had become a ghost town. But Aranov Industries had built an new oil rig over the old oil well. This had revived the town. As for Bullhorn....besides the studio and the power plant, there were several facilities that made it the hub of the region. It had a police station, a fire department, a general store that doubled as the post office, a church and a school. It was also had small park. The only thing missing was a clinic. After some discussion, it had been decided that the medical services would NOT be located in Bullhorn. The State of Indiana did not want to leave East Hope with only one source of incoming. They figured it was a good way not to put all their eggs in one basket. This medical complex would have general practitioners, dentists, psychologists and veterinarians. There were also two floors of Air Force medical facilities and a gym that was trying to get a permit to set up shop on the fourth floor. The region was changing a lot. This was obvious to Kurt when he arrived at Bullhorn. He would be staying in the local motel. The new and improved Bullhorn was built on 9.37 acres further down the road. Until recently, this land had belonged to August Smith. He had sold it to the State of Indiana, whom had then made it part of the town of Bullhorn. The motel, however, was at the original site of the town. Besides the motel, there was nothing there, except two houses. The church had been there as well, but had been moved to the new site. It was the motel that made the changes obvious to Kurt. The place was surrounded by scaffolding and the construction work was clearly in full swing. He could see the outline of the original building, which had been five rooms and a small lobby. The new motel would have eight rooms on the ground floor and another eight on a brand-new top floor. After collecting his key he made his way to Room Three. He

was pleasantly surprised to find that the room was modern and painted in bright colors. Getting here had been a long trip and it was late, so he decided to go to bed. The studio wasn't going anywhere.

Kurt woke late in the morning, showered and dressed. The motel didn't have a restaurant, so he had stopped for supplies yesterday. After the meal he walked out of the room and listened for the click of door locking behind him. He had arrived late. In the bright sunlight, he could see that the construction site was much bigger than he had seen. Besides the work on the motel, eight new houses were being built and two old houses were being painted. There was also a four floor office building and an indoor swimming pool going up.

“Lower Bullhorn?”

“Actually,” A male voice said. “That's further south.”

Kurt turned around to see a man in a sheriff's uniform. His name tag said Wallace.

“Rick Wallace,” The man said. “Mister Eriks, I presume?”

The two men shook hands, then began walking towards the other half of town.

“I thought the new town was on August Smith's old land?”

“Nope. I know that 9.37 Acres sounds big, but it's only a hundred meters by three-hundred and seven meters. And the church and the power facility took up the bulk of it, with the rest of the being used by the park. We started building stuff outside the original plot pretty early on. The good thing about building a town from scratch, you can write the zoning rules yourself.”

Kurt suspected that it had not been that easy. But he suspected that there were also powerful people making this town happen.

~Town just don't appear out of nowhere.~ But he had been around long enough not to ask questions.

“And the studio...”

“It became the first building of what we are calling Project Connect. The plan is to merge the halves of the town. But it will take a while, because we only have enough money and people to build enough houses at a time. At least, at the moment. The rest of the workers are tied up with the pool and the office building.”

“I heard there was also some kind of mining project.”

“That’s over at East Hope. Besides the oil well, we’re also using the top soil that other mines need to get rid of to fill in the old mine tunnels. And they process chemicals, recycling as much as possible. The rest then goes to another company.”

“So what’s the deal with New Lincoln and Lower Bullhorn?”

“Two brand-new towns.” Wallace said. “Lower Bullhorn is an US Air Force base with a barrack town next to it. Of course, the details of what they do at the base are all very hush-hush,” He paused. “As for New Lincoln, there are enough people who want to get out of Indianapolis. They get fed up with city life and want some small town to life in.”

“The problem is that if too many of them move here, it’s no longer a small town.”

“True,” Wallace said with a smile. “This is your stop, Mister Eriks.”

“Thank you for the welcome. See you later, sheriff.”

Kurt gave Wallace a nod and then walked onto the Emerald Productions studio lot.

Earlier – The New Captain

Captain Alexandria Schroeder looked in the mirror. She had brown eyes, black hair and Hispanic skin. Her family had moved here from Germany six generations ago. Her ancestor had been Wilhelm ‘Billy’ Schroeder. Billy had blue eyes,

blond hair and Caucasian skin. He had fallen in love with an Asian girl called Akemi. Ignoring what everybody had said, he had married her. And thus, the great shift of appearance of the Schroeder family began. Billy had also begun the line of Schroeder police officers. He hadn't made it that far up the food chain, but Akemi hadn't cared. She had been happy. In the generations that followed, there had been Detectives, Sergeants and Lieutenants. But nobody had made it to Captain. Until now.

"Captain," The watch commander said. "They're here."

Schroeder was in the main lobby of the police station. She was waiting for two of her officers who were now walking into the station.

"Karens, Van de Meer, about time you showed up."

"Sorry, Captain," Karens said. "Won't happen again."

"Okay. Let's go to my office."

They followed Schroeder to her office. The captain sat behind her desk and the officers sat across from her. She grabbed a folder from a desk drawer.

"Eugene Laverne," She began. "The mastermind who bankrolled the Mad Taxi Bomber. After his involvement was found out, he went missing. Eventually, he resurfaced shot and comatose in an Indianapolis hospital."

"Yes, ma'am," Karens said.

"The thing is that Eugene Laverne is not Eugene Laverne. His fingerprints, blood type and DNA all lead to a man called William Tyler. Tyler is still comatose, so he can't tell me what I want to know....where is the real Eugene Laverne?"

"I thought the FBI was on it?" Van de Meer asked.

"They are," Schroeder said. "But I feel like our part of the equation is way too thin. I want you to do something about that."

"Do you have a plan how we should go about that?"