

Bonus Chapter 285.5

The Rocket Scientist

(January 1)

There it was: “1842.” Matt Greene felt a surge of adrenaline when he saw those numbers on the small house in Tacoma. He’d been thinking – plotting, really – for days about what he would do when he found 1842 Summer Street. Now he was looking at those numbers and doing so made everything real. Very, very real. He felt calm. For the past few days, he assumed he’d be scared, but he wasn’t. Seeing “1842” instantly turned this from theory into the biggest event of his life.

Matt was an unlikely person to be doing this. Until recently, he had been a respectable person - a rocket scientist, in fact. Before the Collapse, he had been working on missile projects. He moved his wife and twelve year-old daughter from Alabama to Tacoma, where Boeing had a small, hidden top-secret office.

Their first summer in Washington State was five years before the Collapse. Matt’s boss, Bob, invited Matt and his family out on his sailboat. It was glorious. The sun was shining, it was a perfect 75 degrees, and the scenery of the Puget Sound’s small inlets and islands was breathtaking, especially to a family who had never been out on the water, let alone a luxury sailboat.

They came to an island with giant evergreen trees jutting up from the rocky coastline and tied the boat to the dock. There was another family waving to them. They went ashore and met their boss’s neighbors who owned a large cabin on the island. Matt was proud that he had such a good job and great friends, and that he could give his wife and daughter experiences like a sailboat cruise to a nice cabin with friendly people. He felt like was being a great husband and father. This was how life was supposed to be.

“These are the Eversons,” Bob said as he introduced Matt’s family to the family with the cabin. “You guys get to know each other while I unload some of my famous marinated steaks from the boat,” Bob said.

“Nice to meet you,” the Everson father said. “I’m Art and this is Kathy,” he said, motioning to his wife. A black-haired teenage boy who appeared to be about 15 or 16 years old came running up to them. “This is Seth,” Art said, “he’s my son.” Seth looked at Matt’s family and suddenly looked down at the ground. He looked up just enough to nod to Matt in a very awkward attempt to greet them and then he walked away without saying a word.

Matt introduced his family. “This is Renae,” he said, pointing to his daughter. He looked over at his wife and said, “And this is Vanessa.” They shook hands with Art and Kathy.

“You got that grill hot?” Bob asked Art as he walked by with a cooler.

“Let’s give you the tour,” Kathy said as she proceeded to show Matt and his family their beautiful cabin. Because it was a small, private island, they had the island to themselves on this sunny summer Saturday.

Over a few ice-cold beers on the cabin’s deck overlooking the water, Matt learned that Art owned an investment company in Tacoma. Art seemed nice. He

downplayed his obvious wealth and accomplishments. He was a name-dropper, though, and seemed to really love that he was a well-connected person in Tacoma political and business circles.

The steaks came and lived up to their billing. The food kept coming and coming until the amazing meal finally ended with strawberry shortcake. "I whip the cream myself," said Kathy with obvious, and well-deserved, pride. The strawberries were perfectly ripe. They were so sweet they tasted like candy. The genuine whipped cream made it the best dessert Matt had ever eaten.

After dinner, the adults continued to drink beer and wine on the deck while they watched the sun set. Matt felt like he was in heaven.

"Where's Renae?" Matt's wife asked at one point, curious of his 12-year old daughter's whereabouts.

"Oh, she and Seth are out exploring the island," Kathy answered, waving a hand in the air.

Suddenly, and for no apparent reason, Matt got up out of his lawn chair. He felt the need to go find Renae. He didn't want to be rude to his hosts, but he needed to check on her. He excused himself and set out to find Renae.

He came up to the kids in a small clearing. To his horror, Renae's face was bloodied and bruised and she was crying. Seth was quickly putting his shorts back on. Matt felt stinging needles of rage and revulsion take over his body. He couldn't speak. He didn't know what to do. Finally, he managed to run over to Renae. Seth ran away.

Matt tried to hug and comfort Renae, but she pushed him away and screamed. It was the first time she had ever pushed him away. He knew that his sweet little Renae was changed forever in the blink of an eye. Her life had been ruined.

Matt ran back to the cabin to get his wife, hoping she could comfort Renae. As he was running, he started to realize he was on a private island and the only way home was Bob's sailboat. It was getting dark and they probably couldn't sail at night. He decided he would do whatever it took to get Renae and his wife on that boat and the hell out of there.

"Come with me, Art!" Matt yelled when he got to the cabin. "Now!" Art was stunned.

"We're leaving now!" he yelled at his wife. "Go get Renae!" he screamed at Vanessa and pointed toward the woods.

He looked at Bob, pointed to the sailboat, and barked, "Take us back now!"

Everyone looked confused and alarmed. Finally, Art asked, "Is there a bear or something out there?"

Matt looked Art in the eyes and said coldly, "You better come with me or I will kill your son. You need to protect him from me until the police get here." No one spoke a word. "Okay," Matt said, frustrated that no one was moving, "he's mine." He ran back to the woods to find Seth. As he was running, he wondered where these feelings of rage had lived his whole life; he didn't know he had such brutal impulses in him. He thought about how he would kill that monstrous piece of shit. As he was running through the island searching for Seth, he looked for pieces of wood that would make a suitable club.

After a few minutes of sprinting through the woods, Matt was out of breath. He faintly heard Art and Bob running behind him yelling about him losing his mind. He looked at a stump and found the perfect club lying on it. He picked it up and wondered how many blows it would take to kill Seth.

Then he realized that killing Seth would make him a murderer. Renae needed her dad around. He put the club down and pulled out his phone. He dialed 911. Luckily, they were close enough to civilization to have cell service.

"What is your location?" the dispatcher asked.

"I don't know," he said. He didn't know the name of the island.

"We are sending out a patrol boat," the dispatcher responded. Matt realized that the dispatcher had his location.

"Okay," Matt said, finally catching his breath. He felt a little bit of relief. The police would handle this.

By now, Art caught up to Matt. "What in the hell is going on?" he yelled to Matt.

"Seth raped Renae!" Matt yelled right back.

Art looked horrified and softly said, "Not again."

"Again?" Matt screamed and started lunging toward Art.

Art leapt out of the way and screamed, "Seth didn't do anything!"

Bob came up the trail and broke them up. He separated them and said to Matt, "You stay here until the police come."

"The police?" Art asked. "Why do the police have to come?"

Matt clenched his fists and walked toward Art.

"Sit down!" Bob yelled. Matt realized that he would be in handcuffs as soon as the police arrived if he didn't calm down.

"Is Renae safe?" Matt asked Bob.

"She's with Vanessa now," Bob replied, which slightly calmed Matt.

Protecting Renae was what he was doing, and now he could stop for a moment.

"You stay here," Bob said to Matt. "Come with me," Bob said to Art and they went back down the trail toward the cabin.

Some time later – Matt didn't know how long, but it was getting dark – a police officer came up to him with a flashlight and took him to the dock.

Seeing the police boat with the blue light flashing calmed Matt a bit more. The law would take care of this. Renae would get justice.

"Ninety days suspended sentence," a judge ordered, six months later. This meant that if Seth didn't rape anyone in the next six months and get caught, the sentence would go away. "And this will be expunged from the young man's record," the judge continued. "I don't want to ruin his life."

"Ruin his life?" Matt yelled. "What about my daughter's!" Matt yelled, as he jumped up from the courtroom bench. He started to walk toward Seth, who was in a suit, looking like a fine, upstanding young man.

The bailiff got up and put his hand on his pistol and motioned with his other hand for Matt to sit back down.

Matt looked at the bailiff's badge and his hand on his pistol. Then it hit him: the "justice" system was a scam. He was realizing this years before the Collapse,

before most people had eventually come to this conclusion. Before the Collapse, everyone thought the courts were there to protect people. The system was protecting someone, Matt thought, but it was Art, and people like him, who had all those connections.

A few days before Seth's "sentencing," Matt learned that the judge hearing the case was Art's golfing buddy. Matt had even gone back and pulled up a picture from the online newspaper archives of the judge and Art golfing together at a charity tournament. When Matt told this to a lawyer friend of his, his friend shrugged and said, "That's how it works here."

After the judge banged the gavel and walked back into his chambers, the bailiff made sure Seth and Art got out of the courtroom safely. Matt sat on bench patiently, while thinking about Art blurting out "Again?" when he learned Seth had raped a girl.

Matt had to get back home to check on Renae. She was in horrible shape, scared all the time. She would burst into tears a few times a day. That was even harder on Matt than the corrupt judge.

Bob was trying to cut Matt breaks, but Matt had been missing a lot of work. Art and Kathy wouldn't talk to Bob anymore; they were convinced that all of this was a misunderstanding and blamed him for having Matt's family out to the cabin in the first place.

A week after the sentencing, Matt was back at work and things seemed to be stabilizing. Until Vanessa called him.

"Come home quick!" she pleaded. "Come home now."

"Is Renae alright?" he asked, grabbing his car keys as he talked to her on his cell phone.

"Come home," she said and hung up.

All the horrible possibilities ran through Matt's mind as he sped home. One particularly dark thought – Renae committing suicide – caused him to get dizzy. He tried to keep control of the car. Finally, and to his surprise, he pulled into the driveway, parking next to a strange car. He ran into the house.

When he went to unlock the door, it was already unlocked. He burst in and saw a frumpy, short woman sitting in his chair. Vanessa stood up and ran over to him.

"And you are?" the woman condescendingly asked Matt, like he needed to justify why he was in his own house.

"Who are *you*?" Matt retorted loudly. Vanessa shot him a look telling him to be nice to this woman.

"I'm with Child Protective Services," she said. "I have some questions."

"About Seth?" Matt asked, relieved that finally someone in the government was going to do something about that monster.

"No," the woman said with a slight roll of her eyes. "I'm investigating you."

"Me?" Matt asked. He assumed he misunderstood what she was saying.

The woman nodded without any expression.

"For what?" Matt asked.

"Putting your daughter in a dangerous situation," the woman replied.

"Is Renae here?" Matt quietly asked, amazed that he could control his emotions.

Vanessa shook her head. "She's over at the Overton's," she said, referring to their elderly neighbor couple.

"Okay," Matt said, "since she's not here, I can say this: Renae was raped by someone who had done it before, but no one told me any of this or," he pointed angrily at the woman, "I never, ever would have gone to that island."

"Settle down," the woman said. "Threatening a public employee is a serious crime." Probably more serious than rape, Matt thought.

"I'm not threatening you," Matt said, trying to calm down. "I'm answering your stupid charge against me."

"Don't threaten me," the woman said. "This can go a lot worse for you if I'm threatened." She had a very slight smile on her face. He could tell that she loved the power.

The woman looked at her laptop and said, "Your wife tells me that you beat your daughter."

Matt looked over at Vanessa with amazement. She said, "No one beats her," paused, and then admitted, "but my husband has spanked her in the past."

The woman typed a few short words on her laptop without looking up.

Matt was starting to realize what was happening. It was no coincidence that just a week after the reluctant sentencing of a very powerful man's son that the government decided to investigate the accuser's family.

"It's in the Bible," Vanessa said. "You know, corporal punishment."

The woman looked up at Vanessa, smiled ever so slightly, and typed some more in her laptop. "The Bible?" the woman said. "What a quaint little book of fairy tales."

Matt realized that his wife had said enough to sink them. "You may leave now..." Matt realized he didn't know her name. "Ms.?"

"We don't give out our names," the woman said. "Too many unstable parents - you know, religious fanatics, mostly - try to track us down," she said. "We need to take precautions."

"Well, ma'am," Matt said, "you may leave now."

The woman typed a few more sentences and mumbled, "Refused to continue interview." Without saying a word, she closed her laptop and left. Matt and Vanessa were silent for a few minutes. In those very long minutes, they pondered all the horrible things that were probably coming at them.

And they were right. Two days later, the woman and an armed police officer came to take Renae. They took her from the Overton's, having conducted enough surveillance on Matt and Vanessa's house to know when Renae would be at the neighbor's. Mrs. Overton came running over to Vanessa to tell her what had happened. Vanessa fell down to the ground and started sobbing. It took her twenty minutes before she could summon the strength to call Matt. He came rushing home and was silent. Strangely silent. He already was formulating a dark plan.

The second worst insult, next to having their daughter taken for her "crime" of being a rape victim, came in the mail the next day. Much to Matt and Vanessa's surprise, the State of Washington charged "bad families" money to pay for the foster

care of their children. The foster care charges were on a sliding scale based on the income of the parents. Matt's lawyer friend told him that the State was paying a foster family about \$600 a month to take care of the child. But, since Matt made nearly \$200,000 a year, he had to pay \$2,700 a month. The State pocketed the \$2,100 difference. Matt's friend said that upper-income parents seemed to have their children taken at an increasingly high rate, as the State was running huge deficits.

The Greenes spent the next four years fighting in court to get their daughter back. Bob finally had to fire Matt; the official reason was all the time he spent in court, but Bob confessed that Matt would soon lose his high security clearance for being a "child abuser." Matt didn't blame Bob because he expected it. Matt found another job, but it paid much less. However, the State kept insisting that he made his old salary of \$200,000 and kept pocketing the \$2,100 difference. Apparently, W2 statements showing his new, lower salary were not convincing enough to the CPS administrative hearing officers.

This was just the beginning of their legal losses. They lost appeal after appeal trying to get Renae back. Matt, who never cared much about politics, was stunned that the feminists running CPS seemed to think it was fine to blame a rape victim for her situation.

Finally, right before the Collapse when the courts were hardly functioning due to budget cutbacks, the State missed a filing deadline and a sympathetic judge – one of the few good ones – gave Matt and Vanessa their daughter back. By then, she was 16. They hardly recognized her. The four years of bouncing from foster home to foster home had traumatized her. The whole time, she wondered what she had done wrong to deserve the punishment. She concluded that being alone with a boy was what she did wrong.

The day they were reunited, the Greenes packed up all their belongings. Vanessa and Renae drove back to Alabama. Matt stayed behind a few days to quit his job and sell their house.

Matt was relieved when he got a call four days later from Vanessa announcing that they had made it back to Alabama and praying for him to rush down there to join them. It was April 30th.

The next day, May Day, the Collapse hit. Matt was glad his family was safely in Alabama, but he was trapped in Washington State.

Then it dawned on him: he was dead. Not physically; at least, not yet. He was dead in that his life was over. He had succeeded after four long years of fighting to get his daughter back and then getting her and his wife to safety. His mission was over.

Or was it? He recalled all the dark thoughts of revenge he'd had over the past four years. Violent thoughts that made him pray to be forgiven for wanting to hurt people like he did.

His first idea was to kill Seth and Art. They were still in Tacoma, presumably, and he knew where they lived. By May 3rd, the police were essentially gone or tied up fighting riots and looting. Matt could stroll into Art's house and finish what he didn't get to do on the island with the club.

He got his pistol, his grandpa's .45 from World War II, and got in his car. He drove to Art's neighborhood. It was dangerous getting there, having to outrun looters chasing him more than once. He came up on Art's very exclusive neighborhood and saw a crowd of looters filling the entrance to the subdivision. He heard shots. The looters looked at him and thought he must be there to loot, too. Matt smiled. He realized that he didn't need to get Art and Seth. The looters had already taken care of those two. Matt felt bad for Kathy because she hadn't done anything to hurt anyone. Then he realized that she had almost certainly covered up Seth's past rapes, and she was just as guilty as Art.

Matt turned his car around and headed home. The airport was closed and the freeways were too jammed to even think about driving to Alabama. He was stuck there and would die there. Suddenly, he felt liberated. He could do something good with what was left of his life. He started coming up with a plan on the long and terrifying car ride home.

When he got home, Matt's thoughts changed to how he would survive the looting and lawlessness from the Collapse. He went over to the Overton's and worked up a neighborhood defense plan with Pete Overton.

For the next few months, Matt survived in Tacoma. He went through all the difficulties of others in Lima-held areas: the gangs, the F-Cards, the corruption. The whole time, he wished he could be with Vanessa and Renae, but he was also glad they made it to a presumably safer place. Alabama was a Patriot state now and, at least from the scattered news reports he got, was doing better than Tacoma.

Matt tried not to dwell on revenge. He had enough on his mind just surviving day to day, but as each day went on, he thought more and more about settling a score. He spent the long days and nights working up plans.

One of the families in Matt's neighborhood was Russian. They were nice. After a while, Matt realized that this family had connections to the Russian mafia. The family itself was not in the mafia, but their sons worked for the Russians. Matt got to know one of the sons, Yuri, and asked one time if he could do him a favor.

"Konyeshna," Yuri said, which was Russian for "of course."

A few weeks later, Yuri brought over a piece of paper. "This is what you requested," Yuri said. Matt couldn't believe it.

"They are hiding him," Yuri said. "No police around him. He's not important enough to have protection. They don't know that we can find out anything for the right price. I have many friends," he said with a smile.

"What do I owe you?" Matt asked Yuri.

"Nichevo," Yuri said, Russian for "nothing." Then Yuri paused and said, "Perhaps in the future I can ask a favor of you."

Matt smiled, but was nervous. He didn't know what the future favor would be, but he really, really wanted to have that piece of paper.

"Konyeshna," Matt said in his best Russian accent and Yuri handed him the paper with a smile.

Matt got out some maps and got to work. When he was fully prepared and it was dark, he got his grandpa's .45 and went out on a little scouting mission. It took him all night and most of the next day to get there since he had to go on foot and make it around roadblocks, F-Corps patrols, and gangs. But he got there. When he

did, he saw a familiar face getting out of a car and going into the house. He was elated. He finally saw a way to resolve all of this.

Matt returned home and prepared for his next trip to the location. He was happy for the first time in years.

The next night, he looked again at the piece of paper and prayed. "Lord," he said in a whisper, "forgive me for what I'm about to do. It's for Renae." Nothing told him he shouldn't go. He would have abandoned his plans if God told him to. Hearing nothing, Matt proceeded.

It was a lot easier to get to the location the second time. It only took him half the time. It was January, New Year's Day, so the night was long and provided many hours of darkness to get across town on foot. He noticed lots of shooting and what sounded like explosions in the distance. He figured there must be an attack going on.

He came up on location at about 1:00 a.m. and could see "1842" from the illumination of the porch light. This was it: 1842 Summer Street, just like what was on the piece of paper from Yuri. Matt paused to make sure he was going to do this. No reason not to, he told himself.

Matt looked for a first floor window to break that he could fit through. He found one, a sliding glass door, and got out the hammer from his backpack. He broke the window and went in.

The lights came on upstairs, but he didn't hear what he was afraid of: a barking dog. Matt went from room to room looking for the man at the house he had recognized the night before. Matt went up the stairs and heard rustling in a bedroom at the end of the hall.

"Get out!" a man yelled. Matt was not afraid. He remembered the feeling he'd had the day Vanessa and Renae got to Alabama: I'm dead now, he thought. Whatever happened to his body was a detail. He didn't care. They had taken everything from him. Now it was his turn.

He ran full speed and kicked the bedroom door. It felt like he ran into a brick wall. The door was solidly locked and he fell back onto the ground, knocking the wind out of him. He waited to be shot.

"I'll call the police!" the man behind the door yelled. But no shots.

Great, Matt, thought, this jackass doesn't have a gun. This just got easier.

Matt used the best tool he had and shot the wimpy lock on the bedroom door. His ears were ringing. He hadn't fired a gun in decades and had forgotten how loud they were.

He broke the door down and rushed into the small bedroom. The lights were on, but no one was in there. That can't be, Matt thought, because he had just heard a voice from in there. He quickly looked around the bed and there he was, lying on the floor trying to hide, right out in the open. Matt drew his .45 and shot the judge until he ran out of ammunition. He calmly walked out of the house. He didn't care if he got caught, but then realized there were no police to catch him.

After a few minutes of walking back toward his home, his cell phone vibrated. It was a text from Renae. It said, "Happy New Year, Daddy."