

The Story of
Matthew DeRemer

Finding Level Ground

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Chapter Two

Excerpt

New Year's Eve—the night we say goodbye to old habits and hello to new beginnings. The DeRemers felt optimistic that night because their family was coming back together, filling in the holes that had built up over the last few difficult years.

The grandfather clock against the wall of the DeRemer living room ticked past 7:30. Matt's mother had made dinner—stone crab claws, steak, a decadent dessert—and the whole family was waiting for Matt to arrive before they ate together. It was a New Year's Eve family tradition—a meal together, followed by a few hours of playing board games like Apples to Apples and Uno, and catching up before the new year dawned.

Earlier, Matt had texted his mother to say he was running late because he had some laundry to do. Julie and Mike waited and the food grew cold. By 8:30, Matt still hadn't shown up. They decided to go ahead and eat, but Mike barely tasted his food. His gut churned with that sixth sense that all parents have...

Something was very, very wrong.

Lynsey offered to drive over to Matt's apartment and check on him, and upon arriving discovered he wasn't there. He hadn't

called, hadn't texted, nor had he answered his parents' calls. The DeRemers stayed up late, leaving the front porch light on and the door unlocked. Julie changed into her pajamas but Mike couldn't fall asleep. He simply could not shake that feeling of unease.

A little after ten o'clock, the doorbell rang—a bad, bad sign. Matt would have walked in unannounced. Anyone who rang the doorbell at that time of night brought news no one wanted to hear.

But still they hoped that maybe Matt had been in an accident or his motorcycle had broken down. Matt had been in a hit-and-run accident on his bike a few months earlier, but after a short hospital stay, he was fine. Both Mike and Julie hoped for the same this time.

A Florida State Trooper stood on their porch, tall and stern and unsmiling. The same light that was left on to be a welcoming beacon for Matt now cast a shadow beneath the dome of the officer's green, wide-brimmed hat.

The trooper stood there a moment, finding his words, and in the space of that silence, Mike and Julie already knew their world would never be the same again. The trooper asked for their IDs, and Julie asked if she should get dressed first, thinking they were just going to the hospital. Mike, however, had seen the look in the trooper's eyes, and knew there was no reason to rush out the door.

The trooper spoke the words no one wants to deliver and grief hit the DeRemers in one hard, fast sucker punch, the kind of pain no one can describe and no one can understand, unless they have been there themselves. Matt, their bright light and their only son, was gone.

Mike and Julie were understandably angry. They had few details and felt powerless, lost. They went to the morgue to try

and see Matt's body but the coroner wouldn't let them in, most likely to spare the family additional pain. Julie went home and sat in front of the computer, refreshing Facebook over and over again. As the news began to spread across the site, Matt's friends filled in some of the blanks about Matt's final hours. "Around three in the morning, the police brought us a bag with just his shoes in it. I wanted to know where everything else was," Julie said. "Where was everything else?"

But more, where was her son? The hole Matt left in his wake was deep, bottomless. The young boy who had been so loud left behind a heartbreaking silence the family could never fill again.

After that night, the biggest question the DeRemers had was *what do we do from here?* How did they begin to recover from the tragic loss of their beloved son, and how did they keep his memory alive? It seemed unfair that someone who lived so large and out loud should be reduced to a few paragraphs in the obituary section of the *Tampa Bay Times*.

Matt had already unwittingly done some of that work with his New Year's Eve Facebook post. When Matt's friends learned of his death, they began to share his post, moved by the irony and depth of his message: *I don't really know where I'll end up tonight, but I do know where I wind up is where I am meant to be.*

Friends of theirs shared it. Perfect strangers shared it. And then Ashton Kutcher saw the post on Twitter and sent it out to his hundreds of thousands of followers. A week after his death, Matt DeRemer had gone viral.

The next thing the family knew, the local news stations and then all the national networks and media, like *Good Morning America* and CNN, were standing on their doorstep or calling constantly, all wanting to hear Matt's story. It seemed the world wanted to understand what had brought him peace on his last

day. To take a peek inside the life of a man who had died too young. What no one really knew was how difficult that journey had been for Matt.