

Prologue

ZAC EASTER STOOD on the long wooden dock leading out onto Lake Ahquabi, gripping the .40-caliber pistol he'd given his dad for Father's Day not even five months before.

The sun had dipped over the horizon on the other side of the Y-shaped lake. Leaves lay in heaps on the fringe of the woods. The gusty November winds died down as the sun sank on the horizon, but there was still a chill in the air. Winter was coming. Zac took out his phone and snapped a picture. He posted it to Snapchat, ignoring the frantic phone calls that were pouring into his phone. God bless America, he captioned the photo.

Where is Zac? All around Zac's hometown, friends and family were terrified. They'd seen his Facebook post a few minutes before: "If your reading this than God bless the times we've had together. Please forgive me. I'm taking the selfish road out. Only God understands what I've been through . . . I will always watch over you!"* They needed to stop him. But how? They didn't even know where he was. From the house where Zac grew up, a few miles away and amidst fields of corn, his parents called. Zac did not pick up. From the small town just down the street where Zac

* Zac's often-haphazard spelling is retained when quoting from his diary and other writings.

had played high school football, and from Des Moines, the big capital city not quite twenty miles to the north, his friends called. Zac did not pick up. At 5:36 p.m., a college roommate texted him: “Hey what’re you up to bud?” No reply. From the law school at Case Western Reserve University, almost seven hundred miles away in Cleveland, Ohio, Ali Epperson—Zac’s girlfriend, and the only person to whom he had fully confided his struggles with his rapidly deteriorating brain—called. Zac did not pick up.

She called again.

He did not pick up.

She called again.

Finally, Zac picked up. There was terror in his voice.

“I can’t do this,” he told her. “It’s never going to get better.”

Ali, a vivacious law student who in many ways was Zac’s opposite—a bleeding-heart liberal who balanced out Zac’s dyed-in-the-wool conservatism—was freaking out. How many hours had she spent on the phone with him, talking about the disease that seemed to be eating his brain from the inside? How many times had the two talked about the sport he loved, the sport that had consumed much of his childhood but now seemed to be consuming the rest of his life as well? How many times had she told him that a real man was not stoic and unfeeling—that a real man must face his demons instead of suffering silently in deference to some antiquated ideal of masculinity? How many times had she told him not to apologize to her, that she loved him despite the crazy stuff that was going on, and that they would work through it all together?

Earlier on this day—Friday the 13th, of all days, in November 2015—he had apologized again. “I’m sorry you fell in love with a guy with a ducked up brain,” Zac had texted her, his phone’s autocorrect softening the swear word. He’d awoken early, started

drinking, and called Ali in a panic late in the morning, shit-faced and swerving his car around the suburbs. She'd coaxed him to drive into a gas station, then into a Jimmy John's to grab a sandwich and sober up. She'd calmed him like she always did. He'd apologized like he always did. She'd texted him back: "You can't choose who you fall in love with. You just fall in love." Then, he'd texted an ominous reply: "If anything happens to [me] just by a chance of luck. Tell my family everything."

Now, things were happening. A friend noticed the setting of Zac's Snapchat photo: the beach on Lake Ahquabi, where Zac and Ali had escaped to in the summer to get away from high school friends and stare at the clouds. The lake was just down the road from his family's house. The lake's name is derived from an ancient Algonquian language. It means "resting place."

Ali kept Zac on the phone. "Listen to the sound of my voice," she soothed him. "Listen to the sound of my voice."

"I'm losing my mind," he cried. "This is it for me!" One Warren County Sheriff's Office cruiser came speeding down the winding hill toward the lake, followed by another. "Ali, did you send these cops here?" The cops got closer to him. He started apologizing to Ali, and he told her he wanted his brain donated for research. Then, Zac's phone cut out.

Out on the dock, Zac pointed the pistol at the darkened sky and fired a warning shot.

That is when a pickup truck sped down the hill and slammed to a stop next to the lake. Zac's father, a burly former high-school football coach named Myles Easter, jumped out. The parking lot quickly filled with squad cars. One deputy, a former all-conference linebacker who played for Myles on the same high school team Zac had played for, trained his assault rifle on Zac. Lasers from

other police rifles danced on Zac's body. The evening was dark, and it was getting cold. Myles saw the cherry-red 2008 Mazda3 Zac called Old Red. He peered into the window of his son's car. He saw an empty six-pack of Coors Light, an empty bottle of Captain Morgan rum, and a pill bottle.

Floodlights illuminated Zac. A black curtain fell on the water behind him. Zac stood up from a picnic table and walked down the pier toward a wooden fishing hut at water's edge. A few more steps, and he'd be inside, alone on the water, out of sight.

"Put your gun down!" the deputies shouted.

"Nope!" Zac yelled with an anguished laugh. "Not gonna do that!"

In a flash, Zac's father realized what was happening: *Zac wants the police to shoot him*. "Fuck it," Myles said to himself. "I can't let this happen."

Zac's father sprinted past the sheriff's deputies and onto the pier. "Zac!" he shouted. *If he shoots me, he shoots me*, the father thought.

"Dad, stop!"

As Myles Easter ran toward his son, Zac's face came into focus. His blue eyes looked foggy and confused. The expression on his still-boyish face matched the tenor of his voice: sad, sick, exhausted, scared. Worn down by life. Beaten, once and for all.

"Zac, I'm coming," Myles said. "Put your gun down."

"Dad!" Zac shouted. "Dad, stop!"

Then, gripping his father's pistol, Zac disappeared into the fishing hut. The door slammed shut behind him.

And Zac Easter was alone.