

THE DEATH

The icy water stabbed at his lungs like a thousand needles as he sucked it in, his body's futile attempt at finding the air it so desperately sought. His head rolled upward toward the surface of the lake and he saw the bright sunlight grow dim as it filtered through the ice. He wondered if clouds were passing in front of the sun as the world darkened around him, but dismissed the thought as inconsequential. He was growing sleepy and allowed himself to slip into the twilight.

Now motionless, Casey drifted upward until he bumped against the ice. His crimson jacket became starkly visible through the ice and he heard a faint voice shouting from an unimaginable distance as his consciousness ebbed away with each passing moment. His eyes stared blankly at the silhouette above him frantically clawing at the barrier which separated them. He felt strangely warm, as if the frigid waters had suddenly been heated. Above, the shape was frantically pounding on the ice, the dull thud of each strike permeating his last moments of consciousness. The darkness finally closed over his eyes and mind and he began to sink.

On the surface of the frozen lake, screams pierced through the wintry air. A thirteen year-old boy's face was flushed with exhaustion and determination as he hacked at the thick ice with his pocket knife, which was woefully inadequate for the job he was asking it to do. Sweat ran down Shawn's face in rivulets. He could see Casey *right there*. Casey was only *three inches* from him, and yet he may as well have been a mile away. The knife blade snapped in half and Shawn screamed in frustration, a frenzied howl he prayed someone would hear.

On the shore, Casey's younger brother raced toward the lake with a heavy rock. The small boy could barely lift the stone, let alone carry it; yet he was managing to run at a full sprint with it. He had run to find something to bash through the ice with the moment Shawn and him had spotted Casey's red jacket several yards from the spot the ice had given way. It was unusually cold this winter, so their mother had insisted that Casey and Leo wear their boots -- the very boots which had doomed Casey. These boots were designed to protect against severe weather and were much heavier than the shoes the boys were accustomed to wearing. Casey's skill at swimming was no match for the weight of these boots and a waterlogged winter jacket. The twelve year-old had sunk very quickly, his attempts at swimming to the surface merely serving to propel him from the hole in the ice.

Leo ran across the ice, nearly slipping more than once on the slick surface. Reaching Shawn, he thrust the rock at his brother's friend. Shawn took it and began bashing it against the ice, ice which had moments before been unyielding and surrendering only a few chips. The *thud, thud* of granite striking the frozen surface of the lake reverberated up the boy's arms as the hole he'd started with his knife enlarged rapidly. His plaintive sobs and Leo's screams for help echoed across the park as Casey began to sink out of sight. Suddenly, the rock broke through the ice, the frigid

water splashed over Shawn and he watched as Casey's face vanished into the murk.

Shawn lunged for the jacket he could still see and his fingertips traced over its surface as the water claimed its prize. Casey sank out of sight. Shawn grabbed the rock and began to enlarge the hole further. Within moments, he'd made it large enough to pull someone through... or for someone to go in. Making up his mind, he stripped off his shoes and jacket and jumped in. Leo screamed. A voice shouted.

Shawn took a deep breath and shoved himself into the icy depths. He knew this lake. He had been swimming in it his entire life and knew that it was not very deep at this spot. He turned and looked upward to make sure he was still within reach of the hole before scanning the water for his friend. Casey had drifted a few feet closer toward shore, his limp fingers trailing through the weeds that grew from the lake bottom. A small fish nibbled curiously at Casey's hair as it floated around his head.

Shawn swam toward his best friend and grabbed hold of a lifeless hand. Struggling with all his might, he forced his way back to the hole in the ice and fought the increasingly desperate urge to inhale. He only needed to make it a couple of more feet, but the weight of Casey's body kept dragging him down. His lungs screamed for air and his diaphragm began to pump his chest to force him to take a breath. He knew he was about to share Casey's fate and silently said a prayer for forgiveness. Then he felt a hand grab his shirt and pull him from the water.

He gasped as his head broke the surface and sucked in the sweet air. He wondered for a moment why he wasn't sinking, then realized that he was being held by a man. His second realization was that he still had a grip on Casey.

"Let me go!" Shawn shouted frantically. "Help *him*!" Shawn pulled Casey into view.

The man tried to pull Shawn out of the water but he resisted, insisting that Casey be looked after first. Shawn held onto the edge of the ice while he watched his friend be dragged from the water. Then he felt the man's strong hands take hold of him again and pull him free. Seeing that Shawn was alert, the man shouted something at a woman standing on the shore, then bent over Casey.

Casey watched the scene from above with mild interest. He could see his friend Shawn and his brother on the lake. What were they doing there? Didn't they realize it was dangerous? Shawn was shivering, and Casey noted the large hole nearby and realized that Shawn must have fallen through. It was a good thing that that guy was there to help. He tried to call to Shawn, but no sound came from his mouth. "*Why is that man not helping Shawn?*" Casey wondered. Then he noticed that the stranger was bent over another boy. "*Who is that?*" Casey drifted closer, and with a shock realized that the man was giving mouth-to-mouth to *him*.

Leo was sobbing. Casey was dead, and Shawn had almost died trying to

rescue him. If he hadn't insisted on tagging along, they wouldn't be in this mess. Casey was dead because of him. "*It's all my fault!*" Leo shouted at himself in his head. Mom was going to *kill* him. He felt someone lift him from the frozen surface. It was the stranger's wife. She was holding him close and he sobbed into her shoulder. Then he heard a sputter and an explosion of coughing. He turned to look at the source of the noise, and saw Casey's blue face slowly regaining a pinkish shade as his brother sucked in air. "CASEY!" he shouted with immense relief.

Air. He had air. He could breathe. He was cold as hell and his lungs burned, but he could *breathe*. Casey shivered under the blanket as he was loaded into the ambulance next to Shawn. Shawn sobbed in the crash cart next to him. Casey reached across the gap and grabbed his friend's hand as the paramedics shut the door and the vehicle began to move.

Shawn looked up when Casey took his hand and saw his friend's mischievous crooked smile. It told him everything was going to be all right.