

## Prologue

This Prologue is from my novel: *The Wisdom of Blood*. It will be serialized on the website in monthly installments

By Jay Cravath

*Author's Note: This scene takes place in the winter of 1978. Jesse is the son of cabin owners Wayne and Ruth Frith, who have a cluster of cedar lodges by a river in northwest Montana—Kootenai to be exact. Karefree Kabins is year-round resort catering to vacationing families and fisherman in summer, and skiers in winter. Sloan Mountain Ski Resort is a winding ten-mile road up from town. The family business also has a fishing shop where Jesse works. On a frigid winter January day, Jesse's mom is at the main dining hall rehearsing with the Kootenai Mandolin and Guitar Society—an all-woman's string band. One of the members is Sara Valentine—in Jesse's class, with whom he has developed a crush.*

The little town of Kootenai, Montana is west of the Rocky Mountain Divide—that great geological wedge separating the direction of water to the sea.

If a snow flake falls on the west side, it flows to the Pacific. On the east slope, moisture washes toward the Gulf of Mexico—trickling into small streams, coursing to the plodding Missouri, and finally the Mississippi to the Gulf. The Rockies' great collection of uplifts, protrusions, escarpments and cliffs were carved by immense prowling glaciers. They pushed mountains to heights that guard the country around Kootenai from severe arctic storms. When a front manages to edge over to the west side, you brace for blistering cold—what the eastern side accepts as recurrent nightmares. Cows freeze in their tracks, families struggle to check animals on a subzero night with the wind and snow whipping so hard visibility becomes a blinding whiteness. Clotheslines are tied between the ranch house and barn door like a thread through a labyrinth, but despite all precautions ranchers sometimes go out to check the animals and do not return. They become falling statues in the snow, blue-faced and staring at the sky.

Jesse Frith had heard a lot of these stories from old men sitting around his dad's fly shop, warming at the pot belly stove. He was cranking out black gnats on the tying vice in anticipation of the spring thaw. Avid locals knew where these little insects would hatch first. They'd grab their fly poles and waders and headed for secret fishing holes.

The silence of the outside world on this 30 below morning was surreal. All of nature seemed shocked into absolute silence, and the stiff snow squeaked under foot, each flake grinding together like iron to iron. You could have on seven layers of clothes, be a bundled plush robot, arms sticking straight out from long underwear, sweaters and lumpy parka, and still the cold managed to find crevices. On such frigid days when he was younger, Jesse begged his mother to dress him up and shuttle him out for an adventure. She obliged—knowing the elements would chase him back for hot chocolate in no time.

Wearing her wry, sporting smile, Ruth Frith would angle her Eskimo through the door, down the porch steps and cheerfully wish him happy hiking. He liked to walk down Kootenai River to see how the ice had formed on the rocks. With weather this cold, splashing water almost seemed to freeze midair, polishing the rocks with a clear ice glaze. Moving water will not freeze, even in 20 below. The creek was partly spring-fed, the temperature coming from deep in the earth at 42 degrees. Steam rose up and dissipated into the air like geysers. He liked to kneel down to examine the icy rocks. He was the scientist in the family.

During Christmas break of his junior year in high school, Jesse had been helping his dad in the shop, taking inventory and remodeling some of the displays. And there were always more flies to tie.

A couple of days before the New Year, Jesse was by himself, manning the store. His dad, Wayne Frith, needed to get some horse hair so went to the Wilcox place upriver, as they had a few palominos. The boy was working on a royal coachman, with its tight red threaded thorax, tufted green haunches and streaming red tail.

It had been bitterly cold for days. A blizzard slipped through and pushed the night temperatures down to minus 31, with days creeping up only to minus 15. The river surface had frozen with a clear glass sheet on top. It was mysterious to look through the ice and see rocks and tufts of seaweed waving in the current, like an animated window-box. The day was brilliantly sunny, reflecting a white expanse.

Jesse left his fly to go outside and get wood for the Franklin stove in the shop. He gazed up at Sloan mountain, a tall white dome. The trees were snowmen. Moisture from Pacific fronts mixed with arctic air to pack a thick coat. Five minutes being outside made him grateful for the efficiency of the modern stove his dad had finally installed. The store was open this Saturday but Jesse didn't expect much business. Those crazy diehard coots were ice fishing on the lake—their little huts, privies on the surface with smoke rolling out of stovepipes. The old men sat inside, lines descending through a drilled hole, sipping their version of antifreeze, listening to cassette tapes and eating bologna sandwiches.

Jesse had just gone through the doorway with the wood when he heard children shouting from outside. Generally there weren't many kids out in this weather. It was hard on the lungs. The neighbors, Cliff and Marge Tallman, were farmers from North Dakota. It could be their children. The Tallmans were Norwegian—their forebears among those immigrants who rode the huge European wave early in the century. This extreme cold was normal for them. You didn't stop what needed to be done.

Jesse listened again. They were distress cries. He threw on Sorrel boots, a parka and mitts. He pushed the door open and flew off the wooden steps, looking upriver toward the noise.

The Tallman kids were down on the ice. It was never a good idea because, no matter how hard it froze, the springs always made soft spots. Jesse only saw two of the three—Olga, around 12 and Jergen, the youngest boy. Bjorn, the middle, wasn't with them. Jesse got closer and saw Olga holding her face.

Jergen stared down into the river. Bjorn had fallen through and was under a 3 inch ice slab as though he had a picture window over him. His eyes alternated from squinting shut to opening with a look of profound terror.

“Get off the ice,” Jesse yelled at the kids. “Run and tell my mom to call an ambulance!”

Jesse had always been calm in emergencies, a trait he got from his dad, who kept his head during the hairiest of times. Olga took off toward the Kabins but Jergen stayed, watching his brother now flailing and clawing at the ice from under the water. Where Bjorn had broken through were some shallow rocks holding him from going down stream. Jesse pushed Jergen off the ice and told him to get his mom and dad. The ice was too thick to break so Jesse lay flat on it over Bjorn and reached his arm underneath the hole where Bjorn had gone in trying to reach for him. Olga was back and said Jesse’s mom would be out in a minute.

“Hold my ankle!” Jesse barked. “But stand on the bank.” She did as she was told and he inched closer to the hole sinking his head and upper chest under to grab the ankle of Bjorn’s snow boot. Bjorn’s thrashing suddenly dislodged him and he drifted in the current. Olga and Jesse followed him. Jesse remembered his dad had a long metal bar for lifting docks. It was outside because he had chipped through the ice yesterday to check its thickness. Jesse ran to get it. “Stay off the ice!” he reminded Olga. She followed after Bjorn, who drifted, then lodged against the left bank in another shallow spot. Jesse ran to get the bar and dragged it back through the snow. The river narrowed about 15 feet down from where he’d broken through to a deep gorge. It was only waist deep and Bjorn was lodged on a boulder that the ice had frozen around.

Jesse realized the ice was thinner around the rock. He might be able to pull him out before he was caught in the current again and taken down into the roaring darkness. The gorge was a place where the entire river emptied into a narrow and deep channel. Bjorn would be a goner. Jesse heard his mom yell that she had called the fire department and they’d be here soon. He yelled at her to bring blankets. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of a group of women standing on the snow-covered porch, looking grim and scared.

Grabbing the bar now, it felt almost weightless, though it was 8 feet long and 60 pounds. Jesse got back to Bjorn and saw he was still. He began chipping around the rock just missing the boy who had curled around it. His snowsuit was wet-dark, hat missing and skin white. Jesse chipped through next to Bjorn’s feet and began making a hole large enough to haul him out. A nice sized chunk triangle-shaped broke away. Jesse pulled it out and continued. He thought of stories where mothers lift a car to get their kid out underneath. Adrenaline must be working because he felt neither his arms nor the bitter cold. He heard the snow crunch and glanced up at his mom, Mrs. Valentine, and Sara hauling blankets.

He went back to work chipping strategically. “Lay them out and make a bed on the bank,” saying it so calmly it sounded like someone else. Jesse judged the hole big enough. He threw the bar aside, slammed his body down on the ice, reached into the hole for Bjorn’s snow boot, moving eerily in the current. Bjorn’s

body jerked slightly, the water pushing it forward. Jesse came up for a breath, then ducked his head and chest underwater again, reaching for the boot. He grabbed it and pulled with a strength that surprised him. When Jesse had lifted Bjorn's leg out to the knee, he grabbed the other leg and pulled him out. Jesse stood up, one foot on the bank, the other on the ice and rotated Bjorn's body face up. He tugged the limp boy up onto the ice like some giant fish, placing him on a sleeping bag on top of the blankets.

Jesse began CPR, silently thanking his Boy Scout lifesaving merit badge. Then he heard the ambulance and saw lights flashing. Two men in bright red parkas clamored down the embankment carrying oxygen tanks and more blankets.

"Good job son," said one, his beard matching the color of his jacket. "We'll take it from here." He moved in and clamped a mask down on Bjorn's bright blue face. The other, heavy set, took over CPR. They both worked on him while two firemen lifted a gurney over the snow bank and pulled it through the snow, setting it down next to Bjorn.

Jesse plopped down in the snow. The Tallmans arrived. Mrs. Tallman sobbed softly while her husband stared stoically down at their son. Jesse was aware of Sara's eyes on him but didn't feel like meeting her glance. His limbs suddenly ached and it hurt to breathe. Someone put a heavy blanket around him, and Jesse stared at the hole he'd pulled Bjorn through. Then he looked down past it into the gorge, with its steady siren roar. Jesse pictured the boy being swept down into the dark blue. He blocked the thought with a shake of his head.

Jesse looked up when he heard the medics lifting the gurney over the snow and onto the road. They kept working on Bjorn while heading toward the ambulance and there was a sudden sputtering sound and coughing from the young boy. Jesse stood up and followed, watching the blue-white of Bjorn's skin getting pink. The gurney slipped into the back of the ambulance and the Tallmans followed.

Wayne had returned and was talking to one of the firemen. He'll make it," the Beard said. "You're not dead until you're warm and dead. When people fall through the ice, especially healthy kids, everything gets chilled. You need less oxygen. Your tissues are placed into a kind of suspension, or stasis. As long as there's a fine heart fibrillation, it will respond to CPR."

Jesse was aware of Sara standing in the snow next to him. She turned to him, and with a whisper said, "That was something, Jesse." She gave him a hard kiss on the cheek. Stunned, like a boy frozen in the ice, he could only stare blankly at her face.