

Cold as Ice – PROLOGUE

Ben Yates was dead. Hank Coalson stood alone in the old cemetery, staring at the large hole being filled by the workers. He craned his neck to see the burlled walnut casket barely visible now. Tears welled in his eyes once more, and he swiped at them with an angry hand. His sorrow was deep, but his rage took precedence. *Rage* at the person responsible for this. *Rage* at the utter uselessness of the police force in his hometown now. But mostly, *rage* at himself. He had caused the chain of events that had led to his best friend's death.

It was his fault Ben was dead.

A gust of wind hit him in the face, and he burrowed deeper within his coat. It was December, almost Christmas. He thought of Ben's wife and children, their grandchildren. Now, no matter how hard they tried, Christmas would be, at best, bittersweet. The friends and community would rally in support at first. But after a few years, life would continue without Ben. Maybe an occasional thought in passing, a memory, or an event he would have been at because he loved this community. Eventually, though, he would be forgotten. They all would. And this fuckin' horrible time in the history of the town would be replaced with new memories, new events.

"Mr. Coalson, the sun's about down. We're finished here." Hank heard the cemetery worker's words. He knew he should be heading home, but he didn't want to move. To leave would put the final action on Ben's life.

"Sir, would you like us to call Mac or Mrs. Coalson?"

Hank glanced down at the small man in the thermal coveralls. His hat was in his hand, a sign of respect. For the life of him he couldn't remember the man's name. *Ben*

Yates was dead. The thought sliced across his brain again, but he buried it deep. Just like Ben. “Thank you, but no. I had to see it through to the end. He was my best friend.”

The man nodded in understanding and took his leave. Hank watched the men gather the tools in silence and head toward the truck. He heard the roar of the engine and the gravel crunch as they made their way out of the cemetery. He was finally alone with Ben.

He stared at the flowers and the fresh mound of dirt. He felt the bile rise in his throat, but he willed it down. *His fault. All his fault.* Hank shivered. He was so damn cold. *But not as cold as Ben. He was dead. Cold as ice, dead.*

His control broke, and he fell to his knees, sobbing out in pain and sorrow. He laid his head on the mound of dirt, his tears making muddy rivulets on the fresh earth, strong fingers digging into the mess, desperately trying to rid himself of the guilt and the anguish.

If only I had known, Ben, how all this would have gone down, I would have turned myself in, faced the consequences. It was self-defense, but I was young and scared, for both me and Ginny. I thought I was doing the right thing, calling you to help me bury the man that had tried to kill us, but in the end, he won. His psycho son has seen to that.

I killed you, Ben, just as surely as if I had been the one to shoot you in the back. His son is taking out his revenge on me. He’s going to keep on killing all those I love until there is no one left but me.

I’m sorry my friend, my brother. I caused this, but I couldn’t let them take my Ginny.

He didn’t hear the crunch of the leaves behind him or the soft voice calling his name, but her touch, yes, he felt her touch on the back of his head. He turned his face and through his tears, he saw her. His Ginny. His wife of over forty years. She moved his muddy arm to encompass her and she hugged him tight. She knew he didn’t need the words. He simply needed the comfort. Squeezing her to his chest, her tears mingling with his, they held each other and said a final goodbye to their beloved and trustworthy friend.

“We will make this right,” she whispered to him.

“No, darlin’. We can’t. We can’t bring Ben back,” he murmured, tears burning his chapped cheeks.

She took her hand and brought it to his face. “Then we will see justice done. For Ben and his family.”

“I’m thinking of turning myself in. Maybe that will stop him.”

“No, you will not, Hank Coalson!” Ginny pulled away from him. “It was not murder, it was self-defense.” She cuddled in once again. “Besides, do you really think it would stop Pye? He wants all of us dead.”

Hank shuddered at the reality of her words. Robert Pye, the son of the bastard that had tried to sell Ginny forty years ago in his child trafficking scheme, wanted revenge for his father’s death. He was determined to wipe the Coalsons off the face of the earth.

Pye had torched Hank’s eldest son’s business and almost killed three of his other sons in the inferno; he had partnered with a drug lord to frame another son; and just a few months ago, the asshole had overseen a con to completely ruin all the family businesses and take the orchard, while framing Hank’s son, Lucky, for murder. “I don’t know what we can do, Ginny.”

Ginny Coalson caressed the cheek of the man she loved. “You’ve risked your life for me, given me more love than I had ever imagined existed. You’re the man who makes my heart complete.” She kissed him tenderly and helped him to his feet. “We do what we did the last time the Pye family threatened our happiness and our lives. We fight back and win.”