

11/20/09 - Long Gone, a Tamara Hayle Mystery -- Chapter One

I was Pet Hayle's one and only call, which shocked the hell out of me. There were four of us sitting like dummies on the planks that passed for benches in the county courthouse. Each of us had just plunked down good money to get some badass out of jail, and everybody was pissed. Except maybe the kid who sat by himself on the edge of the bench, his jeans riding so low on his butt I wanted to snatch them up.

The walls were a sickly shade of yellow and the cracks in the red linoleum were filled with something I didn't want to look at hard. The water cooler tucked in the corner burped like a dozing drunk.

The hefty woman sitting beside me muttered that this would be the *last* damn time she'd bail out her fool of a husband, emphasizing each word with a fist to an open palm. The man next to her nodded and tapped his foot to a tune nobody else could hear.

I'd had to use the home my parents left as collateral, and that house, in all its dilapidation, was the only thing of monetary value I had in this world. I didn't want to think about what would happen to me and my son Jamal, if I lost it. Truth was, the house was mine by default. My brother Johnny was dead and it belonged to Pet as much to as it did to me, and she knew it. Technically, a case might be made that because I'd paid the taxes and maintained it I should call the shots. But "technically" didn't mean squat when it came to blood.

I hadn't seen my sister since I was eight and didn't know who she had become or if I could trust any word out her mouth. All I knew was that when she'd left nearly thirty years ago, whispering her last sad words, my world had changed forever. Only my grandmother was left after that, and for a kid like me in a family like mine, more was needed than a loving old woman who grew weaker the more I needed her strength.

"I'm gone, Angel," Pet had whispered. "Don't tell nobody, not even Grandma. I got to get out of here now." "Angel" was what she called me, and when she murmured it that night, me half-sleep and scared, I knew she'd been crying. *Why?* was what I should have asked but didn't.

I was a tough little kid who'd just poke out her lip when blows from her mama came raining down, never crying even when Pet jumped in the way, taking those whacks on her tiny little self. But I cried that night.

When my parents asked the next morning if I knew where she'd gone, I sullenly

shook my head. She'll be back before night, my father muttered with a drunk's dumb assurance. She got it good here, she ain't going nowhere, piped in my mother, and I, lips locked tight, looked straight through them. Johnny was gone as usual, escaping into worlds we knew nothing about.

The day passed, then that night, and first thing next morning my grandma called the police but Pet had just turned 18, and they said it was too early to start a search. An 18-year-old black girl on the run from a block like ours didn't warrant much effort.

So when Pet had called my office last night, just as I was contemplating a hot, fried fish sandwich and wondering how my son was doing in South Jersey with his dad, the sound of her whispering "Angel" ripped that old scab right off.

"Pet? Pet, is that you? ..." I collapsed in my chair, hardly able to get the words out, gripping the phone so hard my fingers hurt.

"Ain't no fucking Pet, no more. I've claimed the name they gave me, Angel. Petula. Petula Hayle!" She interrupted me like she used to when I was a kid, with a burst of laughter that made me giggle. There was a harshness to her laugh I didn't remember, but decades had passed since I'd heard it and old memories, the tender ones, were tumbling back: The smell of the Jergens lotion she wore for perfume. The softness of her palms when she covered my ears so I couldn't hear my parents shriek.

"Before you get all carried away about hearing from me and shit, let me tell you why I'm calling, better hear that first."

Pet had always talked "proper," not even an "ain't," and the way she was cursing now gave me pause for a moment. My sister was deep inside that voice.

"Where you been Pet?"

"Angel, I'm damn near fifty, ain't been nobody's pet in years."

"How long you been in town?"

"Long enough for them to haul me into jail for something I ain't done."

"Jail?" The word came out like it I'd never heard it before.

She coughed hard. "You remember Coleman Hawthorne? Well, somebody shot him

dead three nights ago. That's what Truman told me."

"Truman Hawthorne, his son? How did he get in touch with you? Why do they think you had anything to do with it?"

"Never mind that now. I need you to bail me out this shit. You still got that house our parents left us?"

Stunned, I didn't answer.

"You got to put it up. Angel, I ain't never been so desperate in my life. You've got to get me out of this. Please. I ain't got nobody else I can call." She hung up then, and I knew she was probably right.

I called my friend Jake then, who is a lawyer, to help me post a property bond with the court. I could tell Jake was skeptical but had the good sense not to offer unrequested advice, and when I heard back from him this morning, I went straight to the courthouse.

Thirty years had changed everything I remembered. As a girl Pet had been slight but built, her breasts and hips budding bigger than anybody else's. She was bony now, the folds of her soiled gray pant suit hung loosely on her body, and her hair was lank. The locks I played with as a child had been soft and thick, the sweet fragrance of Dixie Peach lingering on my fingers after I brushed them.

I stood up, rushed toward her and she hugged me tight, thinner even than she looked.

"I was looking for a kid with braids and ribbons," she said, pushing me away to get a better look. "And here you are a grown woman, Angel. Pretty enough to make me cry for all I missed, and I *did* miss you."

She hugged me again, and I let her pull me into her like she used to when I was girl, my big sister's arms around me making me safe.

"Oh, Lord, what have I missed," she said, whispering it this time. As I hugged her back, all the anger and doubt I'd felt earlier disappeared. What was left of my family was home.

"Oh, Pet..."

"Petula! Pet brings back too much pain."

"I'll try to remember," I said, the obedient girl listening to her elder sister. Anything was possible.

"I know I got some explaining to do?"

"Yeah, you do," I said.

"Go on and say what you gotta say."

"Why didn't you come back?" I asked.

She shook her head and gave a smile that wasn't one.

"You left me all alone," I said, my voice breaking like that eight year old kid's. "I had to put them all away. Mama, daddy, grandma, Johnny. You didn't even fucking show up when Johnny died!"

She stared at the window for a while, squinting from the sun then turned back to me. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry!" I stared at her in disbelief.

"By the time I heard about them, they were gone and it was too late to face anyone, especially you," she said, with no expression.

"You didn't even come for Johnny. Not even for him," I said. "You broke Grandma's heart, you know that?"

"Grandma's heart was broke long before I left," she said. "You know what it was like in our house with those poor crazy kids we had for parents. Hell, mama was fifteen when she had me. I didn't hear about Johnny till years later when someone thought to mention it in passing. Let the past lay where it belong, Angel. Just let it lay. I'm back now. And why did he do that to himself anyway? Shoot himself dead like that?"

"Too many people left without telling him why," I said even though I knew damn well

it wasn't true. I don't know why my brother killed himself and probably never will.

Silence again. Maybe she was thinking about it what I'd said or simply didn't give a damn.

"So who mentioned Johnny's death in passing?" I said, the anger still in my voice.

"Truman Hawthorne. Me and Truman been talking for years. Ever since I left." The way she said "talking," drawling it out in a lurid slur, suggested they'd been doing more than flapping lips, and a burst of rage shot through me. But I was scared like a kid gets scared, that she might walk out and disappear again, so I held it back.

Coleman Hawthorne, his wife Althea and their two kids, Darlitta and Truman, had lived two floors below us in the Hayes Homes where we all grew up. Coleman had been a friend of my father and had bought his first bar, Cole's Hole, with money my father and two other men in the building loaned him. If he paid them back, it had probably been in trade?free drinks, no cash, just bourbon. Hawthorne owned four bars now, three in Newark and one in Orange.

He was one of those old-time businessmen who had kept the city alive in its dying throes then hung around long enough to celebrate its rebirth. A recent article in the *Star-Ledger* had played his loyalty up with a page-long feature and picture of him standing proudly over his wife, who was disabled, and two of his three children, which included Cole James, the product of a long-term affair polite folks never mentioned. Truman, his oldest son, was nowhere to be seen.

When we were kids, my father used to say he hoped Truman and Pet would end up married?probably to insure him frequent access to Cole's Hole rather than his daughter's happiness. No father in his right mind would wish Truman Hawthorne on his daughter these days. He was a shifty drunk who looked disheveled whenever I saw him on the street. He always avoided my eyes.

"You said on the phone that Truman was the one who told you his father had been murdered."

"Told me somebody shot him three times night before last."

"Three times?" I asked. If you're going to shot somebody, you usually do it once then forget it or fill them with lead until the gun runs dry.

Her eyes were closed, her hands folded demurely in her lap like she was praying.

"How come they think you did it?"

"I ain't seen that man in damn near thirty years."

Even as a kid, I knew my sister wasn't as innocent as she liked to play. "Fast" was what my grandma called her which to my kid's ear sounded good because I loved to run. My mother called her something else: slut. All I knew was that it wasn't me and it hadn't been my sister.

I was quiet on the walk to the car as my new commitment settled in. Jamal was with his father for most of the summer, so I wouldn't have to hear his mouth about our new roommate. But my son had a generous spirit, with well-timed wisecracks and hugs. Hopefully, by the time he got home, I would have found her a job and another place to stay. My friend Annie had recently bought a small building and owed me a favor. Wyvetta Green, who owned the beauty salon below my office, might be able to find her a job. Maybe it was like Pet said, my grandmother was looking out for both of us.

But it would be up to me to make things happen. First would come Jake. I'd beg him to represent her, and I knew if I pleaded hard enough he would. After Jake, I'd call some old contacts in the department and get the real story behind why they picked her up. There had to be other suspects.

I had made good money with my last job and DeWayne had been on-time with his child support payments. I had a few small jobs running that didn't require much effort or leg work and would bring in enough change to survive on.

But right now Cole James, Coleman Hawthorne's middle-age love-child, was heading toward us fast. He was dressed in his uniform and brawnier than he looked in the photograph in the *Ledger*, more like his father than I remembered. He walked like him, too, and I wondered how long it took him to master that strut. He hadn't lived with his father as a kid, but maybe he'd picked it up later. He was known to be his father's favorite, despite being born "outside." Coleman Hawthorne soundly rejected Truman, his natural son, but stood proudly behind Cole James, probably because he had made something of himself.

He was a detective in the Newark police department who had inherited his father's charming, seductive eyes, which gave him a mellow demeanor despite his reputation as a take no-shit cop with an evil-ass temper.

Despite that, people loved him. Although the murder rate in Newark had plunged, it wasn't low enough to suit most folks who felt the only good thug was a stone-dead one.

When he got to us, he grabbed my sister's thin shoulders so savagely she fell backwards.

"I didn't do nothing to him," Pet said, her eyes darting away then back to his face, too scared to lie.

"I know you did it, and I know why," Cole James said, a dreadful light glistening in those long-lashed, pretty eyes. I gently removed his hands from my sister's shoulder, and he dropped them to his sides.

"I'm very sorry about what happened to your father, Mr. James. We used to live under...him.. in the old Hayes Homes." I hesitated about the family bit, not sure how he felt about his siblings.

"I know who you are, Ms. Hayle. I remember your brother from the old days. Respected him."

"Then you must know that nobody in my family would be capable of shooting your father like that."

"Ask her what why she came back here. Ask her about what she *thinks* is *payback*."

"I will," I said, my voice controlled and reasonable.

"I *been* coming back," Pet said, stepping from behind my back, taunting him. I hid my surprise, not taking my eyes off him. "And what happened all them years back *happened*. I seen worst than that shit last week."

"Look at yourself, you foul-mouthed old tramp! A filthy, dried-up old tramp who my father never even looked at good." The disgust in his voice hit their mark hard. Pet cringed, her gaze dropping to the ground. I followed it down, noting for the first time her torn, dirty sneakers.

Then she picked her head back up. "Why don't you ask your tramp of a mama about killing him," she said in a low, hard voice. "Ask Dorothea James. She had more reason to kill him than I could ever have in this lifetime or the next."

As he balled his hand into a fist and drew his body tight, I caught my breath. Then he relaxed, glancing back at the building we'd just left, remembering maybe just where we were standing.

"Let's go," I said guiding my sister away from him.

"I'll get you for this," he said, grabbing for Pet again, but she dodged him this time, pulling herself up straight to confront him.

"You ain't getting me for shit cause I ain't done shit," she said.

But she was trembling by the time we got to the car. She climbed into the front seat and closed her eyes, clutching herself tightly.

I told her not to worry about Cole James because he was just one cop in a whole department and they wouldn't let him anywhere near the case because the victim was his father. That seemed to make her feel better, and she nodded as if she understood. I asked her if she was hungry and what she wanted to eat and she said McDonalds so we stopped at the big one on Central Avenue on the way back to the house.

I hadn't eaten at McDonalds since Jamal was a child, but the smell of those salty fries and greasy hamburgers made my stomach growl with hunger. I ordered drinks, fries and Big Macs for both of us and sat down across from her at a table. She gobbled down her hamburger so fast I gave her half of mine. I sipped my coffee as she polished off my fries and when she finished, she leaned back in the chair, closing her eyes like she had in the car.

"So how long you been living here and there?"

"Couple of years. Made money where I could. You name it Angel I been it." She looked around the restaurant and chuckled. "I worked at a Mickey Ds outside Philly for a minute. Always had me in the back though, put the young ones in front. Think I'd be sick of the smell, but sometimes it's all I want to eat.

"Cleaned old ladies' butts in Boston, bussed tables in New Haven. That's just the legal ones," she added with a wink. "I ain't never tricked, though. Could have made big money if I had. I was pretty back in the day. Worked bars in Providence till I lost

my side tooth, couldn't smile wide no more then. Got as far west as Chi-town. Married for a minute then got tired of him going upside my head. Had enough of that with Mama, so I wasn't there long. You was married, too, weren't you, Angel?"

"Briefly," I said, frowning at the thought. "Who told you about that?"

"Truman."

"So you talk to him a lot, huh? Not to nobody else?" I said and she shrugged lazily. Not sure what to say to that, I went to the front counter to buy her an apple pie and me some more coffee. She was pulling hard on a cigarette when I sat back down.

"You got to go outside and smoke," I said, and she stuffed it out on the foil on her plate, tucking the dead butt back into the carton.

"So you never came back to Newark?"

"Nope. One place I stayed away from. Too much shit."

Was she lying to me or Cole James?

"What kind of shit?"

"Shit that's none of your business," she said, finishing off her apple pie and wiping her mouth with her hand.

Stung by her tone, I leaned back in my chair studying her face. That nagging ache that came before the hugs and all the talk about grandma was back along with a string of "shouldn'taves" : *shouldn't've paid that damn bail, shouldn't've opened my damn house, shouldn't've picked up that damn phone in the first place.*

"What you thinking about, Angel," she said, as sweet as could be, which *really* pissed me off.

How hard would it be, I wondered, to duck out the back door and leave her sorry butt sitting here?

But after she finished her coke she followed me out of McDonald's, ragged sneakers slapping loudly on the floor as we headed out the door. When we were inside the car, I turned on the air-conditioner but didn't start it. She pulled out the left-over cigarette butt stuffing tobacco back into the torn paper with her thumb.

"We got to get some things straight before we leave," I said. She lit the cigarette, and I snatched it out of her mouth, nearly burning my fingers in the process. I stuffed it out in the ashtray, and her eyes grew big with hurt.

"Like what?" she said, indignant.

"Like, you never smoke in my car or my house. Got it?"

She chuckled. "You one of them health nuts? Who would have thought it, Angel, the way you used to wolf down them Snickers bars I used to bring you."

"Second, don't call me Angel. I'm not your angel. Third I want to know what Cole James meant when he said you had reason to kill his father."

"Ain't nothing to it."

"Then get out my damn car, Petula Hayes. Get your skinny ass out my car." I reached across her and popped open the lock.

"Why you need to know?" she said in a small voice.

"Because I need to know everything we're dealing with," I said, more gently.

She stared straight ahead. "I can't tell it without a cigarette. That much I know."

I rolled down the windows and she lit her cigarette, drawing the smoke in deep.

"You don't remember what happened the day I left, do you? About that fight me and mama had?" I shook my head. That night had stayed with me but not the day.

"I ran out the house swearing I was grown and it would be the last time she'd ever see me not knowing it would be. "

"Where did you go?"

"It was my birthday. Eighteen-years old. Don't you remember that caramel cake grandma baked the night before? Smell of caramel still bring tears to my eyes. Didn't know shit that day, though, thought I knew every damn thing in the world. So he told me to come with him."

"Who told you to go where?"

"Who we talking about? Coleman Hawthorne. Told me when I turned 18 to come over there to that bar and get myself a drink . Said it the night before. He'd brought Daddy home stinking drunk. I was sitting at the table, grandma had just brought the cake. So that was just what I did after that fight with mama."

"What did you fight about?"

She shrugged off-handedly. "What time I had to be home. What I owed them for raising me. But I was eighteen and wasn't about to put up with her shit. I'd gotten myself an application to Upsala College over there in East Orange, figured it was time to make something of myself. I was feeling grown so I figured that was just what I was going to do, go over there and get myself a drink.

"You remember him back in the day? Good-looking something. Gave those beautiful eyes to both his sons. Used to wear shades all the time, black and skinny. Them eyes were like cat's eyes and when he took them shades off, they followed you around like a cat's do, tracking down a mouse. He was strong like a wrestler, too. Women stood at attention, skirts hiked above their drawers, when he strolled into a room. I don't know what he saw in a kid like me."

"All I remember about Coleman Hawthorne was that he always brought stuff home from the bar. Nuts for me. Pretzels. Port wine for Mama. I thought he was nice."

"There wasn't nothing nice about him," Pet said. "So I went over there, cute as I wanna be, sat down big and bad at the bar, and he gave me everything I wanted to drink. Singapore slings, mostly. Kids' drinks. Shit, I must have been there close to three hours, bar was closing and he said, all casual-like. It's your 18th birthday, Pet, want to go somewhere special after I close up here. He said it so sweet and pretty and I remember that to this day how pretty he said it, and I was too drunk to talk but I must have told him yeah, because everything my mama had told me not to do I doing, and so I must have told him yes.

" I figured he was going to take me to a show or something like that. We went out to his car, after all these years, Angel, I remember that damn car. Tan, big like a hearse. But the car smelled bad, like somebody had puked in it then covered it up. To this day, I get sick when I smell them damn pine cardboard things folks hang in their cars.

"Ended up at some broke-down shit hole on route 3, took me into a room, laid me

down on the bed. This here is your birthday gift from me, he said, and he took off my skirt and pulled down my panties.

"I'd only done it twice before. Just twice, but I used to talk like I had done it lots, walked like I had but I sure didn't want to do it with him, not like that, and I told him so but he just kept on at it, and I started crying because I was scared like the kid I was and then I said think about Althea, Coleman, think about my daddy don't this to me and he slapped me twice so hard across the mouth I thought he broke my nose then stuffed my own panties in my mouth.

"Then he raped me, Angel. He did it so long and rough I couldn't get up and walk. I just lay there bleeding. He tore me up so bad I peed right there on the bed, laying right there under him, under all that dead weight. Then he sat up and smoked a cigarette. You ready to go now, he said. You ready to go home?

"I couldn't do nothing but cry, so he put some money on the night table, tucked it neat and proper right under the ashtray then told me to call myself a cab when I got ready then he kissed me on the cheek and left."

Pet pulled out another cigarette and tried to light a cigarette but her hand was shaking so hard she couldn't keep the match steady, so I reached over and helped her hold it, and she glanced at me with a small, sad smile.

"I rolled the washcloth up tight and stuffed it high in me when I got in the shower, trying to wash him out, but I could still smell him, feel him, then I took the money and went home.

"The elevator stopped on his floor; I don't know why. Maybe somebody had pushed it and changed their minds. Maybe it was just one of Satan's little tricks. Something made me get out and walk to his apartment. Don't ask me what I was going to say to him, maybe it was her I wanted to see. Show her what he'd done to me. My eye had swelled big and purple by then and my hair was standing all over my head. Somebody come toward the door when I rang but didn't open it. I must have stood there and rung that damn bell ten times, but whoever it was didn't give a shit.

"When I went home, Daddy was drunk. She was asleep, sick and tired of him. Johnny was running the streets. I just said good bye to you and left."

"Where did you go?"

"Truman had moved in with friends and I went over there to see him because I knew

he would believe what his father had done to me because he used to beat him and his mama every now and then. Didn't know that about him, did you?" She added the last with a bitter chuckle, and I shook my head.

"Couldn't the two of you..."

"I didn't want to go to the cops. I was 18 and they'd probably think I'd brought it on myself. Truman? He was always in trouble, which was why they threw him out in the first place. Truman had some money saved so I took the first bus I could catch. Providence, Rhode Island. "

As I took her story into me, my hatred toward this man who had done this to sister overwhelmed me. Yet still there was the question she hadn't answered, and I had to know.

"Why now, Pet? Why did you finally come home?"

She gave me a strange, crooked smile. "I saw a picture of him in the paper, grinning with his old crippled wife and something came over me. When a man takes you ugly like that, he rips the soul right out your flesh. I needed to say something to him, make him face what he'd done to me. Didn't get a chance, did I?"

She lazily blew cigarette smoke out the window then touched my cheek like she used to do when I was a kid.

"The one thing I thought about during all these years, the one sweet thing, was you, Angel. I had some bad times, but you were in the good ones just the way you looked back then, so pretty and sweet, with them braids grandma used to plait and them red ribbons I used to buy you at *Two Guys*. My own little angel tucked deep inside me in a place he didn't touch."

I held my sister tight then. For all the years I'd missed her and all the ones I hoped we'd have, and with everything I had in me, I promised I'd get her out of this mess.