

My Mother's Apprentice Chapter 1

“Live for yourself and you will live in vain. Live for others, and you will live again.” Bob Marley

1973

“Yesterday Once More” The Carpenters

Sometimes living on a hillside in Jamaica with only one electrical outlet and no phone was a plus. This was one of those times.

Ginger wasn't looking forward to her best friend, Karen's reaction, to the letter she mailed to her well over a month ago. It should have arrived by now and Ginger knew within a few hours of reading it, Karen would have crafted her reply. She was sure Karen's response was in the mail on its way to Jamaica by now. Ginger dreaded Karen's handwritten smack upside the head. She knew once Karen was done with that, she'd go on to “Why didn't you call me? You know I'm always in your corner!” Ginger knew what Karen would say before she wrote it. They'd been friends since they were five years old. Their moms, Barb and Ellie, had been the closest of friends and their daughters had followed suit. Karen was Ginger's best and only female friend. She hated to think what life would be like were that to change. Even though they saw most things differently, it didn't matter. Ginger was the artsy

type, tall, auburn hair, and slender. Karen was the smart and practical one with dark brown hair and as she liked to call it, “jumbo petite” in size. The one with the “pretty face.” The two hardly ever saw eye to eye on just about everything, but it never mattered. Ginger hoped her letter wouldn’t change that.

She wondered when Donovan, her live in boyfriend, would get home. She looked at her watch, the only piece of real jewelry she still owned. The rest had gone the way of pawnshops or sticky-fingered friends. It was a gift from her mom for her birthday six months before Ellie died in a car accident in 1971, just two years earlier. A drunk driver hit her car broadside. That was the day they took Ginger’s sunshine away.

Ginger loved the watch. It looked like a gold bangle bracelet and had a blue topaz on each side of its face. She’d come close to selling it a time or two when things were tight, but Donovan wouldn’t let her. She’d always love him for that.

The plywood walls of their little hut held up the corrugated sheet metal that rippled to double as a roof and gutters. It would have been considered well below standards in the US, but it was the norm here in Jamaica.

The yard made up for whatever the house lacked. Hibiscus, poinsettias, and bougainvillea draped themselves over the little stone wall she and Donovan had built around the edge of their lot. The colors alone were enough to wake her up every day, but she still brewed coffee over an open fire in the mornings, using the sleeping embers in the fire pit from the night before. The Queen Ann palm had grown to twice its size since she

planted it right after she arrived, six months earlier. Jamaica was a colorful contrast to the way things looked in the States in the winter and she was okay with that. The dirt floor made it easy to keep clean. No need for a mop and who could complain about that, except when the rains came. All one could do was wait for the sun to shine again and in Jamaica, it always did.

She shook her head to clear the memory of what she was hiding from Donovan, but knew that wouldn't help. She picked up a stub from a joint left over from earlier in the day and lit it up. Sitting on her favorite branch that twisted under the banyan tree, she inhaled and held in the smoke. There it was, that familiar wave of relief. She finished the ganja and picked up her guitar.

She'd been told she had her mother's voice. Some days Ellie's words were echoed in her songwriting. It seemed Ellie's reflection followed her just about everywhere. They both had the auburn hair and olive-toned skin. Their voices were similar and they looked alike, but Ginger thought that was where the likeness ended.

Her newest remake of a song was "You Are My Sunshine," using the reggae style she'd learned to emulate since meeting Donovan. She leaned into the song and lost the negative thoughts for a while. She stopped for a moment when she thought she heard footsteps and listened. She looked up to see Paulie peeking at her through the banana tree leaves.

"Awwk! Sunshine! Awwk!" the green parrot squawked.

"Geez oh flip, Paulie," she repeated one of her mom's favorite phrases and put her hand to her throat to slow her

heart that had skipped a beat. “You shouldn’t sneak up on a girl like that!” The bird hopped to the ground and waddled over to her, his green feathers glowed in the Jamaican afternoon sunshine. She reached out and stroked his head. She was the only one Paulie would allow to touch him. Donovan never could understand how she’d been able to get the bird to trust her. She assured him Paulie was a good judge of character. Paulie became her trusted friend and proved to be a good confidante, one that didn’t require a letter or an explanation.

“So, Paulie,” she leaned the guitar against the tree, “I guess she’s gotten my letter by now. By the looks of things, I should have another week or two before her reply gets back to me.” The bird waddled in a circle in front of her. She walked across the yard and pulled off a bunch of small green bananas. Pulling the ripest one off, she peeled it and broke it in half, part for her and the rest for Paulie.

A trickle of sweat escaped down her face from the afternoon sunshine. She gathered up her hair and twisted it into a knot on the top of her head to cool off.

Her love of rich foods haunted her thighs, but she discovered it was nothing a diet pill or two couldn’t handle. The meds helped keep her slim, if not just a little edgy. She reasoned that working on a singing career dictated a good image, and she needed all the help she could get.

She picked up the guitar again and glided back into the song. Sometimes she stared at the sea, but most times she closed her eyes, until memories showed up and then she’d open them again. Her younger brothers, Timmy and William, had become her kids by default when her

mom passed away. Her parents had been in the middle of an ugly divorce when Ellie died. Ginger moved back to her dad's to help out. She felt bad leaving them when she moved to Jamaica, but she had to get out of there. They were now alone with Dad and Roberta, his new wife and one of Ginger's mother's ex-best friends. She just couldn't deal with living there anymore. One of them had to go and it was apparent it wasn't going to be Roberta. When Ginger met Donovan and started to fall in love with him and the idea of living in Jamaica, the decision was easier. Jamaica was the perfect escape route.

The beep of a car horn in the distance pushed away her memories. She looked down the hill to see Donovan waving as Kenroy drove away in his taxi. He turned to walk up the path that zigzagged its way up the mountainside dodging banyan trees that had taken up residence long before the path had come along. They were leasing the land from a Jamaican landlord. "Quite a difference from Standish Drive," she had written in an earlier letter to Karen trying to describe her new home. "There's no snow sledding down this hill, but sometimes when it rains, the neighborhood kids slide down on cardboard boxes."

"Ginga!" Donovan hollered in his half English, half French Jamaican accent. He waved up at her and she blinked in the sunshine that peeked through the leaves of the trees. Putting her hand over her eyes so she could see where he was, Donovan's dark skin glistened in the sun and the orange tee shirt was drenched with sweat. His dreadlocks were tucked under his brown knit hat. She stood up and leaned the guitar against the base of a

banana tree and walked down the path dodging the ruts from the last hard rain that had dug into the hillside. She lifted her skirt to avoid the branches as she walked past her garden. She always thought it funny that what grew wild along the roads of this island were houseplants back home in the States.

When she moved to Ocho Rios with Donovan, or Ochi as the locals called it, she was surprised. She'd thought Jamaica would be one long beach day, but soon discovered there was a price to be paid for the lush tropical setting. The borrowed clouds from the rain forest down the coast in Port Antonio made rain frequent on the north coast of Jamaica. Then she discovered waterfalls. They were everywhere in Jamaica, from little to large, narrow to wide. The sound was always the same and loud enough to drown out most any bad mood she might have.

Donovan met her halfway up the path. She stood on her toes and kissed him on the cheek. "Hey, how was work?" she asked. She turned and began to walk back up the hill. She looked over her shoulder as they climbed back up the mountainside single file.

"It was work, you know?" Donovan answered. As soon as they got to the top of the hill he reached over and tugged her back to him. He pulled her hair loose, and it fell back down over her shoulders. He ran his hands through her coconut milk-washed hair. He loved running his fingers through the silky strands. He turned her around by the shoulders to face him.

"Guess what?" she asked.

"What, my lady?" he sat on the wall they'd built together and pulled her down onto his lap. She threw her

legs over his and held him around the neck, laying her head on his shoulder.

“Jack Ruby might want me to sing at his tavern regularly!” She felt his back stiffen. He sighed. Jack Ruby was a well-known record producer and sound system entrepreneur.

“You don’t have to hang out down der, Ging. I make ‘nuf money for us to fix up de house and save some too,” he pled his case. She was so weary of male insecurities and wasn’t used to Donovan showing his.

“It would only be three nights a week and you can come down and hang out while. It’s not a sure thing just yet, but I hope it will be.” She jumped up to start filleting the fish she’d bought from their neighbor, Matthew, after he returned from his morning fishing trip.

Donovan walked over and started a fire to cook dinner. He gratefully changed the subject. “You get new charcoal?” he asked.

“Yeah, Matthew finished a new batch in the pit. He promised it’s a good batch and will last a while.” Matthew was a fisherman and charcoal-making entrepreneur.

“I’m gonna take a shower, Babe,” he said as she placed the frying pan on the fire to get it good and hot. He headed over to their makeshift bathroom. The cistern sat on the roof of the bathroom and enabled them to collect water to meet their needs, at least most of the time. It worked great until a drought would come, about every 20 years or so, according to the landlord. The water level had gotten pretty low this year before the rains finally came. And came they did.

She carried the fish to the “kitchen” which consisted of a washbasin, a plank of wood for a counter-cutting board, and a fire pit on the ground. She filleted the fish and heated up the oil in the iron skillet over the wood fire. She sliced an onion and a carrot from their hillside garden and threw them in with the fish to brown. Paulie circled her on the outdoor kitchen dirt floor clucking as a reminder to her that he hadn’t eaten enough this afternoon. “Don’t worry, boy, you’ll get yours,” she tossed him a piece of bread to tide him over as she finished preparing dinner. She walked back over to where the old refrigerator was plugged into their only electrical socket in the bedroom, opened the door and pulled out a bowl of leftover callaloo (what Ginger fondly called an upgrade on American spinach) from the night before.

She heard Donovan turn the shower off. He stepped out and wrapped a towel around his waist. “Should I dress for dinner, dear?” he joked, grabbing her hand, and pulling her to the bedroom.

“Only if you lose the towel, my man,” she jerked the towel loose and it dropped to the ground. He took the bowl of callaloo out of her hands and sat it on the bedside table. She darted back over to the frying pan on the fire, picked it up, sat it on the ground. There was no need for a hot pad on a dirt floor either. Another plus. She giggled as she ran back to their bedroom brushing the banana tree leaf to the side that acted as a curtain.

The heat of the day waned as they lay in each other’s arms until their hunger pains began to get the better of them. “I guess we’d better finish cooking dinner,” Ginger said. She stood up and wrapped the sheet around her as

she headed back to the fire and put the pan back over the coals.

“Oh yeah,” Donovan said as he reached into his work pants pocket and pulled out an envelope. “I stopped at the post office and there was a letter there for you from Karen.” He handed the envelope to her and her heart sank. Geez, she didn’t waste any time.