

JESSICA LOST HER WOBBLE

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DEDICATION

To my husband, Chris, who continuously encourages me to
write.

PROLOGUE

HE PLACED THE receiver back on the hook. How odd. Could it be a prank? No, the phone call was too official. Besides, none of his friends played jokes. No one he could think of knew about his past with Jessie. The call was definitely legitimate.

But why would a doctor contact him about Jessie? It had been decades since he last saw her. The doctor's tone was serious, and he simply stated that the matter concerned his ex-wife, asking if they could talk.

After all this time, he owed nothing to Jessie. He was sure they had settled what had been between them long ago. He was happy and content with his new life, and

he wished the same for Jessie. He had no way of knowing if this were the case, though. He had lost track of her not long after they had parted ways. Maybe she had remarried. If so, why was she still using his last name? He struggled with whether to go or just to ignore the call. But his curious nature was getting the better of him.

Should he tell his wife about the call? Carol knew that he had once been married to Jessie. He kept no secrets from her. No, he would go and see what it was about and then tell her. That wouldn't be keeping a secret if he told her after the fact. He reasoned he would have more to relate to her if he waited until after the visit. Telling her beforehand would only cause her to worry. The whole matter might be nothing. He let out a sigh. The appointment was tomorrow. He would sleep on it.

The glow of the moon that night came through the bedroom window and lit up Carol's face. Over the years she had aged little. What few lines she had, dissolved into childlike innocence with her retreat into sleep. He wondered if time had been so kind to Jessie. He was deluding himself. He knew it hadn't been. A pang of guilt shot through him as he wrapped his arm around his wife's curved belly. Usually after making love he would pass out, but tonight was different. Instead of sleep he counted his blessings, one by one. But Jessie kept creeping into the picture. All the possible scenarios he could think of played over and over in his mind before exhaustion won out.

CHAPTER 1

JESSIE GRABBED her usual chocolate bar and cola and set them on the wooden counter. Its indented surface had seen better days. Day after day, people placed their customary purchases on this aged, worn structure. The oak, long ago absent of grain, had absorbed into its essence an ever so faint odor that came from every hand throughout the years that had ever stroked its exterior. It was not an unpleasant smell. It was a scent that said, *I know each one of you and what you will slide across my surface. I have ingested you into my skin. I know the routine. You are routine.*

If nothing else, Jessie exemplified dull routine habits — bad ones. The junk food was the least of it. For the zillionth time, she told herself it was time to give up her sorry habits, her old life, and start anew. That had been

the plan all along in coming to the island. That was three years ago, not that it mattered. Time stood still here

It was a day like any other, yet there was a taste of change in the air. Today would be the beginning of a breakthrough. Jessie knew it as well as she knew her own name.

The owner of the store, Mr. Roberts, was in the back helping Mrs. Gibbons. Like the wooden counter, Mrs. Gibbons, too, had seen better days. Jessie looked back and smiled at Mrs. Gibbons and tried not to show impatience. No one on the island showed impatience or annoyance of any kind. It was one of those unspoken rules of paradise. That was the kind of place the island was, a paradise — a fantasy of the mind. Each resident made it into what they wanted.

Mrs. Gibbons personified the definition of whimsical. Short and boxlike in stature, she looked like something out of a cartoon. Gold-rimmed, sparkly glasses teetered on the tip of her nose. She painted her lips red in the center like a porcelain doll. When she smiled back at Jessie, the pale ends of her lips curving upward were nearly invisible. Mrs. Gibbons raised her eyelids, which didn't even come close to the umber penciled on eyebrows. She wore one of those typical brightly colored, flowered shirts that one finds on an island. Force of gravity and a thin shirt indicated she had forgotten to wear a bra. It was a blessing to the viewer she wasn't well endowed. Mrs. Gibbons finished her fashion repertoire off with neon red shorts, exhibiting knobby knees. The low-heeled ochre sandals she wore displayed chipped crimson toenails which matched her shorts. And as for Mrs. Gibbons' leathery tanned blue veined legs, well, you had to give her credit. Jessie wished

for such a blithe attitude. She gave Mrs. Gibbons another smile, for good measure.

It was easy to forgive the fashion transgressions of a woman of eighty-something years, who had recently lost her husband. There was a lot of forgiveness on the island. Other than the paradise factor, to forgive, to be forgiven, and mainly to forget was why people came here. There were a lot of inhabitants like Mrs. Gibbons. Everyone referred to them as locals. Jessie fit somewhere in the void, between local and tourist.

Before the island, Jessie had lived in New York City. Aggravation was a way of life there. She could relate to Mrs. Gibbons and creatures like her having been on the wrong end of the aggravation and pity stick before moving here. Jessie saw Mrs. Gibbons and other misfits of society as kindred spirits and sympathized.

Annoyance, aggravation, criticism, or irritation of any kind was unfathomable, behaviors you left behind when you came here. Such attributes were akin to hitting a child. Even before Jessie came to the island, she never let such sentiments surface. She showed few emotions. It was the professional opinion of Dr. Linn, her therapist, that Jessie needed to emote.

Jessie had replied that she didn't know how. The doctor had interpreted it as she didn't know the meaning of the word and looked at her like she was stupid. That's how Jessie perceived it. Even though, he was from somewhere in Asia, he had a better command of the English language than she did. Jessie didn't know how to show emotion, at least in public. To Jessie, two or more people meant public. She let it go. Why explain? Explaining would only create those emotions she was

uncomfortable with.

While Jessie hovered over the counter, she fingered over the packs of gum. It passed the time while she waited. She never purchased gum. She wasn't a gum chewer. Her ex had a habit of chewing it after he smoked, Juicy Fruit if her memory was correct. She remembered. Why pretend that she didn't remember even the tiniest little thing he did? There were big irritations and small irritations. His smoking was a big irritation. The gum chewing was minor.

Mr. Roberts smiled and looked her way. "Jessie, I'll be with you in a moment."

"No hurry," she replied as she scanned the magazines. Jessie had time. All she had these days was time. Like Mrs. Gibbons, it was becoming more about comfort and taking life at a slow pace.

For Mrs. Gibbons, the comfort thing happened after her husband's funeral. *What a cute couple they were* had become a cliché on the island. The bra had been for Mr. Gibbons. It just wasn't necessary anymore.

That was how Jessie felt now — unnecessary. She should ditch her bras. What a peculiar way to describe one's life — unnecessary. That was something she could remember her mother saying. Or was that her imagination? No, she remembered her mother saying, "I feel so unnecessary today."

While Mr. Roberts was in back assisting Mrs. Gibbons, a young blonde girl, wearing a pink shirt and jeans, entered the store.

Jessie's mother loved the color pink. Pink roses were her mother's favorite flower. She had a garden full of every variety of pink rose. Jessie did her best to hold onto

the pleasant memories.

Jessie felt the young girl's eyes on her. She envied the girl's youthfulness but more so her straight hair. Every strand was in place falling in a perfect pattern down her back. Jessie pushed her own defiant caramel curl that fell over her right eye behind her ear. The move was counterproductive since it exposed more freckles. Jessie preferred to call them freckles. God forbid they were the age spots her aunt had warned her about. Aunt Agatha had been a big proponent of skin as white as a pearl and warned against too much sun; advice Jessie disregarded. Maybe she imagined the spots — just something her aunt had put in her mind. The impression had lingered there, the way her mother's feeling, of being unnecessary, had somehow lodged in her brain.

Jessie looked down at the magazine. The word UNNECESSARY glared out at her in big bold letters. Startled, she let out a small shriek, catching the attention of Mr. Roberts and the girl. Mrs. Gibbons was oblivious. Jessie looked up and said, "Sorry." She looked back down at the magazine. She refocused. It said in big, bold letters, "Necessary Items for Every Woman's Closet." It was just her imagination.

It was the same with the age spots — just her imagination. Besides, she had to push her nose up against the mirror to see them. Maybe they weren't there at all. Maybe she should ditch the mirror with the bras.

Funny, how all the negative thoughts of others took up permanent residence in her psyche. Jessie chanted a silent mantra, *think only pleasant thoughts*. It was her new exercise in changing her life, in breaking those bad habits. She had read a magazine article about how to change

your life with positive thoughts. After reading the article, she decided that was to be her new mantra, think only positive thoughts.

She looked back at the blonde. What must the young girl be thinking? She had to be in her early twenties, maybe her daughter's age. Jessie was now pushing the mid-forty envelope. People had always thought her younger, but those days were getting further apart. There had been a lot of days when she had seen young guys looking at her, some even flirting. She chalked up no flirtations to little, if any, new guys on the island. The tourist season would bring them back. That was a positive thought.

Now, she was Mrs. or ma'am. Ma'am was a turning point that every woman dreaded. She still wore a ring. She didn't mind being a Mrs.

There had been no reason to take the ring off. Jessie had lost weight since coming to the island. She didn't own a scale, but her clothes were looser. She reasoned that when her finger got skinny enough, the gold band would just fall off. That would save her the trouble of the momentous decision to remove it.

Eating wasn't a big pastime on the island, except for fish fries. Jessie remembered all those late night dinners she had in New York. On the island, she often skipped dinner. Usually, she was in bed an hour after sunset, turning the pages of a magazine or a mystery novel until she fell asleep. She avoided romance novels. They were fantasy, something Dr. Linn had told her to get over. Dr. Linn was big on facing reality.

The blonde's quick stare penetrated Jessie's very soul.

Only pleasant thoughts, she told herself. Jessie knew everything the blonde was thinking. She admired Jessie's carefree hair, natural curl with different streaks of colors running through it. It had touches of the rainbow — crimson and tinges of blonde from the sun. The blonde thought Jessie a natural island being, a legged mermaid, and wanted to emulate her.

The blonde had worked at the makeup counter in a department store in New York. It started out as a summer job, but her boss kept asking her to stay. What she lacked in makeup skills, she made up for with an outgoing personality. Her supervisor had said that she had a way of making women feel good about themselves after their makeovers. Her customers felt on top of the world and wanted to exploit this new sense of well-being. That caused them to buy more makeup. Before coming to the island, she promised her boss one more month. She didn't want a makeup counter to be her career.

The blonde thought some women just looked good without makeup. On some days, she just wanted to tell them so. Even though she was a talker, she did her best not to let errant thoughts slip to customers as she worked on commission and therefore, needed to sell the make-up.

Island life was different. It had taken an hour just for her hair, and another for her makeup to get it just right so it wouldn't be over or under done. Then the breeze and negative ions coming from the ocean disintegrated all her hard work. She planned on putting makeup behind her when her samples ran out. It was just one of those customs she still adhered to for the moment.

She was young, and her moments had become wherever the wind took her. Before her alias as a makeup technician, she had subscribed to the beatnik scene, which required no makeup. She was a creature of extremes. Her father had suggested some time at the island as a place of transition and reflection. Her father had a yogic way of thinking. Behind the make-up counter, it was all about image. Even at her

young age, she realized it was mere facade. Here, the makeup had to become a part of you, something that people didn't notice. So why wear it at all?

She looked over at Mrs. Gibbons. She thought how adorable she was while contemplating how to tone her down. She was midway through the makeover process before she commanded her mind to halt. She reasoned it would be sacrilege to take away her old lady island charm. She had been here two days. It was like entering an alien world. She could feel transition in the sea air already.

The blonde looked back at the woman at the counter. What was her age? Early thirties she thought. She saw her look back. All that natural beauty, and yet, there was a sadness about her. She felt like reaching out to her. She didn't know why.

Mr. Roberts, after attending to Mrs. Gibbons, made his way over and rang up Jessie's purchases.

"So, how have you been Jessie? Haven't seen you in a while," he asked.

"I'm fine, and how is your family?"

"Everyone is as well as could be expected. Cork will be home from college on Thanksgiving. Myra and I are looking forward to that."

He didn't bother to look at the prices. He knew them by heart. Just a month ago, Cork would have waited on her before making his way back to school. Jessie put a dollar bill down and took her change, declaring a bag wasn't necessary.

Mr. Roberts had known her for over a decade. He had known her children. His was a generational store, one of the first stores on the island, a landmark, to which everyone came. She had remembered old Mr. Roberts behind the counter on their first summers here. She knew

old Mr. Roberts name was Carl. His son, the one waiting on her, was Carl, Jr. Jessie guessed him to be maybe ten years older than herself. He had reminded her plenty of times to call him Carl, but she just couldn't kick the habit of calling him Mr. Roberts.

Before making her way out of the store, she looked up, giving a less than confident smile to both Mr. Roberts and the girl who was now trying on sunglasses. If Jessie emoted anything, it was not having confidence.

The girl must have been visiting a relative since it was off-season. They got few tourists this time of year. Jessie had heard nothing. She had been such a hermit as of late. It had been two weeks since she did any grocery shopping. Nor, had she been to the laundromat for a good bit either. That was the place to hear the latest gossip. Even paradises had to have some excitement. She listened to the gossip but didn't gossip herself. She never knew any gossip to contribute, and even if she did, she didn't like making judgments. That didn't apply in her case. Jessie indulged in self-criticism. It was something that Dr. Linn had pointed out to her. She didn't need a therapist to tell her that. Jessie feared she was the topic of conversation at the laundromat, or maybe they found her boring. She pushed it out of her mind. She tried to leave the judgment back in New York.

Mr. Roberts would have filled Jessie in if the girl had not been within earshot. He knew all the comings and goings. Jessie and Mr. Roberts had an unspoken bond. Mrs. Gibbons might have also told her, although her information was rather unreliable these days.

The wooden door whined, and the bell rang as Jessie departed the store. Everything in the old store

groaned, especially the wide-planked oak floor. The morning air was crisp and fresh as she stepped out onto the sidewalk. She felt the sea breeze and smelled the dogs and their owners before they approached, but the fish store down the street overpowered them all.

It was early and not too many people were out, except for the dog walkers carrying their morning cups of coffee. It reminded her of Central Park.

She sniffed the aroma coming from one of the coffee shops as she passed by. The locals referred to it as a hole in the wall, but of all the coffee shops on the island, it was the chosen one. Mugs covered one entire wall. Some belonged to the coffee shop. Etched names in a childlike scroll adorned the others. Most were bad examples of pottery class gone awry. They didn't need names. The wall of cups, as it was called, was a tourist fascination. Like Mr. Robert's store, it was an island landmark. Jessie thought if perhaps she could hold each one in her hands, she could sense the life of the person it belonged to.

Jessie preferred tea. Her husband was a coffee drinker. Both her son and daughter had followed in his footsteps. Josh sometimes had tea, but Gina never touched the stuff. Jessie had never felt the need for coffee or for a dog. Coffee had a bitter taste, and dogs were just too much work, like washing her hair. But after three years on the island, she was considering a dog, for company. Her daughter was on her second Scottish terrier. The first one died at eight years of age. Gina was eight when she got him. Annabelle, her second Scottish terrier, was named after a doll she had when she was little. Jessie would give the idea of owning a dog more thought. She didn't want to rush into anything.

Jessie was aloof by nature, and dogs were the opposite, just not a good match. It was the same with her and her husband. Not a good match. Her daughter had inherited the aloof trait from her. Gina was reserved around Jessie. She was different around different people, like a chameleon. Josh was a different story. He got along with everyone. He was exactly as he appeared, no pretense.

Could a mother love one child more than the other? No, she told herself. She loved them in an equal manner, yet in a different way if that made any sense. Sometimes it took a little more work to spread out the equality. Josh drew people to him like bees to honey. His life was cut too short. How many times did she hear the good die young? Still, it was not fair.

There had been several dogs on the estate she had grown up on, sheepdogs and watchdogs, all running free. On the island, where there was a leash law, the islanders treated their dogs like they were their children. They took them to the vet and talked about their people diseases. Jessie listened in all politeness as the pet owners told their stories. The world of pets spoke a foreign language she wasn't yet privy to.

Her mind wandered. She was too self-absorbed, another one of those bad habits or character flaws she hoped to abandon. She had known people that could meet someone new, talk to them for fifteen minutes, and have enough information for a book. Jessie was lucky to catch their name. Possibly she was just going senile like poor old Mrs. Gibbons.

Dogs had always come up to Josh. Her son hadn't had a dog but was as good with animals as he was with people. Animals had sensed the goodness in him. Jessie didn't

know how to relate to people or animals. She attributed it to growing up without a mother.

Jessie's mother had died when she was young. She overheard the doctor talking about complications from female issues. Her father, who was much older than her mother, had never elaborated on the cause of death. He was too old school to speak openly about such matters. She gave up asking about her mother because it had caused her father great distress. That convinced her of her father's great love for her mother. The memories she had were shaky and inaccurate. Still, Jessie relied on any memories she could grasp, made up or not. Her father wasn't a big talker. Jessie must have taken after him in that respect.

After the funeral, her father gave her a locket, instructing her to treat it as a precious piece of jewelry. It was, and still is, her most precious and only piece of jewelry aside from her wedding band. It held an ink drawing of her mother. A tear rolled down her father's cheek as he placed it around her neck. Her father had never shown the least interest in remarrying. He had died before Jessie reached adulthood. His sister, Aunt Agatha, took charge of her. Aunt Agatha passed away not too long after Father. There was no one to tell her if her memories were correct. Jessie left the estate, all the furniture covered in white sheets to await the next owner. She took a page from her father's book and learned to leave things behind.

In retrospect, she concluded her father was afraid if he talked about her mother, a flood wall of emotions would break through. That's what might happen to her if she weren't careful. Jessie's father had been unapproachable when it came to her mother. He had

been more than kind to Jessie and affectionate, in every other way. Any form of discipline just wasn't in his nature. He hadn't believed in striking a child, probably why she never spanked Josh or Gina.

So many things changed after her father's death. That was why she was on the beach in a small cottage by herself, no children, no dogs, no husband. She was leaving things behind. Emotions couldn't surface without reminders. Maybe she was running away. Jessie had no choice. She had to accept what was and try to make the best of what life had given her.

She wasn't alone. It was as if half the people on the island were in a self-check in witness protection plan. And, it was during this time of year she felt most exposed. There was little sun to rejoice in and few tourists to hide behind in October. The islanders used the dogs as their shield against life's adversities. They needed the dogs to sense the goodness in them. Maybe Gina needed the same. Jessie needed it now.

Gina was to make an appearance soon. Jessie, in her excitement, placed a dog mat, water bowl, and food bowl in the kitchen. The mere fact that Gina named the dog after her favorite doll made Jessie think that childhood couldn't have been all that bleak for Gina.

Gina's visit didn't come. She hadn't visited since Jessie came to live on the island. It was always the same excuse, a new boyfriend, not a good time to leave. Gina changed lovers with the seasons. She started college twice, but each time she dropped out. Jessie had once attempted a surprise visit back to New York to see Gina. It did not go well. Jessie hadn't mustered the courage to revisit that situation.

Mr. Roberts quit asking about her daughter. It was a

small island. Everyone knew everyone else's pain. He never asked about her husband, either. Jessie sensed that Mr. Roberts didn't like her husband, but maybe he failed to remember him. Mr. Roberts had never brought him up, even after her son's death.

Mr. Roberts was born and bred on the island. Most of the residents hadn't been. They made their way here hoping the ocean air would absorb their pain — physical, mental, or emotional. A lot ended up staying. That was the way it was with her. She just stayed. A summer escape turned into home. The island held many of the good memories, where her children had played on the beach. She had brought Josh and Gina here during the summers when they were just toddlers. Her husband came at first, but after a few years, he made work-related excuses to stay behind.

Even with all that had transpired in her life, she still found the ocean to be a hopeful place. Jessie didn't associate her husband with the island. She sat on the beach and imagined the troubles drifting out with the tide. But on some days, no matter how hard she tried to leave things behind, the tide would just bring them back in. This was one of those days. Everything was surfacing. It was her time of the month and a full moon to boot. She blamed it on that. Jessie knew that some women her age were already in the menopausal stages. Jessie had always been as regular as clockwork from age thirteen. That was when Aunt Agatha moved in with her and father.

She skipped breakfast. It was too early for a cola. So she put it in the fridge for later. She rarely drank alcohol. There were plenty on the island who did. A little wine in the afternoon helped the inhabitants deal with their

misfortunes. Lack of money wasn't one of their difficulties. Most here had money, or they wouldn't be living here, including her. Money was not a template for happiness.

The thought of wine in the afternoon had more than once entered Jessie's mind. But drinking alcohol so early, or even a bottle of soda, was too akin to an addiction. Besides, she didn't even like wine that much. Nor did she own wine glasses. She already had enough addictions, mild ones. Drinking alone was more hard-core, a realm she hoped she hadn't reached yet or would never reach. A pot of tea met her requirements.

She struck a match, lit the burner and put the teakettle on to boil. She went through her array of blends, ninety percent herbal. Herbal was for company, not that there ever was any. Herbal also sounded like she had her life altogether, which she didn't. She was saving the herbal tea for her enlightenment period or for company, whichever came first. If she became enlightened first, then more than likely, she wouldn't have the need for company. She would be complete unto herself. That was how she envisioned enlightenment.

She chose the familiar oolong, a bag. Loose tea was for when she was feeling better about herself and felt like making the effort. She might as well stay in sync with the situation. Today was all about taking the easy route, like foregoing makeup.

She rolled back the wrapper on the candy bar she had purchased at Mr. Robert's store. It wasn't too early for chocolate, especially dark. Dark chocolate was better for you. It relieved depression. Jessie had read it in a magazine. After all, people ate chocolate donuts for

breakfast. Was there a difference? What was a donut? It was flour and sugar laden chocolate, covered with sprinkles and powdered sugar. She was sure that science could make the case that a solid chunk of dark chocolate was healthier. She had long ago given up milk chocolate. She preferred white chocolate, although it wasn't chocolate at all. It was just cocoa butter, a by-product of chocolate, milk and sugar, another fact she had picked up in the same magazine article.

Jessie placed her new "used" book on the table. She had acquired the book a few weeks ago in the island's lone bookstore. Along with dogs, reading was a big pastime on the island. The book was about yogis.

The book reminded her of the day she was sitting in the hole-in-the-wall coffee shop, when a group of shiny bald monks dressed in orange robes sauntered in. It took a lot to ruffle the locals. This did. There were polite stares and raised eyebrows. That was the extent of their disturbance. At any rate, the locals were pillars of control. If a hurricane were to ever hit the island, Jessie knew she would be in good hands. The monks' presence on the island, even with all the wacky tourists one might see, was a rare appearance. Their manifestation made the locals take a brief reverential pause.

The five monks struck a chord with Jessie. All had herbal tea but one. He had coffee, black, the leader, no doubt. They were a jovial bunch, taking life in stride, as if they were experiencing a dream. What if it was all a dream, like the song, "Row, Row, Row Your Boat?" She had become philosophical since her son's death and since her divorce. Those things made most people reflect on life or step out of it altogether. Jessie was somewhere in the

middle. She saw their appearance on the island as some kind of sign and later asked the bookstore owner if there were any books on monks. Myrtle, the owner, went to the back of the store and pulled out a worn cardboard box. She reached in pulling out one that was a little tattered around the edges. Today was the day she would read it.

Josh, like the monks, had taken life in stride. Jessie had dealt with the pain of his death in her usual manner, aloofness. On most days, she felt his presence; on other days, she felt she was dreaming his presence. When Jessie observed something good in life, she attributed it to Josh watching over her. Each day she made it a point to witness good or at least humor. Otherwise, she would go insane.

She made up games in her mind about the Islanders. They were like dolls in a house, put there for her entertainment. One day, she would write about them. It would be a best-selling novel. Her book would have a prominent spot on Myrtle's front table and be in the windows of all the New York bookstores. People excused authors for aloofness or detachment from life. Jessie decided from this point forward to delve more into the lives of the locals. She would have to find out more than names when she talked with them, but if it was a dream, couldn't she just imagine their stories?

Jessie wasn't so distant from life, not any more than most. She was just the center of her own universe as were other humans. She would get her book published. Those who branded her as aloof and remote would boast of her genius saying they knew it all along.

Or maybe she would just take up art. Every other island resident was an amateur or hobby artist. On any sunny day, one had to maneuver through the easels and

their owners lining the boardwalk. Ocean scenes filled the local art galleries, shops, restaurants, and cafes. Paintings hung in the most incongruous places. She once saw one in a gas station. They were always a side item sold on commission. More often than not, the owner's wife or niece had painted them. Maybe the blonde girl was a budding artist who had come here to paint.

No, she would opt for being a novelist since that would set her apart. She knew no writers on the island, only readers. The oil painting market along with seashell sculptures was already too flooded. And besides she would have to join one of the artist groups or guilds on the island. They were all in competition with each other. There were groups for most things on the island. She wasn't a joiner. Most writers weren't.

Enough of this self-pity, she told herself. No, it wasn't self-pity. It was a plan. The chocolate had invigorated her to try something new. The book she was reading would give her inspiration. She would find some books on writing, but she couldn't show her face in the bookstore without at least starting this one. Without a doubt, Myrtle would ask her opinion of it. Myrtle was one of those outgoing sorts with an inquisitive nature. She always knew what everyone was reading even if they hadn't purchased it in her shop. Maybe the bookstore was just a front. In secret, Myrtle was writing her own book about the island natives. Jessie would have to get the jump on her.

The book in her hands had belonged to some professor. Two weeks after his funeral, his daughter had brought his entire collection in for a small pittance. He had been a physics professor by day and a closet esoteric by night. There had been books on Carl Jung, Emerson,

Thoreau, books on Gnosticism, and physics textbooks. Myrtle had given Jessie the easiest read. The box was dusty and Myrtle gave the book a quick wipe before depositing it in the bag. Myrtle told Jessie she had browsed the contents of the box upon its arrival and had not bothered to empty it since the books weren't the usual reads of the islanders. Jessie surmised that would be romance novels, fishing books, books on how to best catch them or cook them, or something having to do with dogs.

Jessie understood little about yoga or yogis. There were always art fairs during the summer along the boardwalk. The closest she ever got to a yoga practitioner was while visiting one of the weaving booths, three years ago. She didn't understand why there would be over one weaving booth since rugs would just be a collection pool for sand. Everything had traces of sand, one of the pitfalls of island life.

The hippie couple that had come to the booth was intense in their investigation of a thick white rug. The girl wanted the rug for a yoga mat. It was critical that it be white. White represented purity.

As far as vendors went, hippie or beatnik types were the norm. Jessie observed how the couple and vendor related to each other. The girl's boyfriend had a beard and tattoos, a vest, no shirt, and a macramé wristband resembling a dog's chew toy, grime embedded into its fibers. Other than cutting it off, there was no way to remove it from his wrist. Showers didn't seem to be a high priority.

His girlfriend had a neck-load of beads and scant clothing, revealing prominently the areas of her body that hadn't seen a razor. Nor, like Mrs. Gibbons, did the hippie

girl feel the necessity of a bra. One could make the argument she didn't need one, except for those extra chilly days. Flat breasts had to be a plus for yoga. Ample endowments might get in the way or throw off one's balance. Balance was key in yoga. Balance was key in life. Jessie didn't have too much of it.

The booth had no cover, and the sun blistered down on them. Jessie's olfactory sense told her that deodorant also wasn't a high priority. *Be kind and not judgmental*, she told herself. She thought of the laundromat ladies. She was becoming one of them. Jessie resolved to become more compassionate in her observance of the couple. She reasoned over in her mind all the possibilities for the yoga couple's plight. There was no shower or bathtub for shaving, more than likely just a lake for bathing. The couple called a tent or Volkswagen van home. There was no money for impermanent items such as bras or deodorant. After psychoanalyzing the couple, Jessie's summation of them bordered on undying admiration. Maybe shaving was the next ritual she would drop. Whom was she shaving for, anyway? Bathing was different. She couldn't do without hot baths. A hot bath gave her a bit of peace and helped her sleep at night.

The official garb of vendors boiled down to tie-dye, jeans, loose fitting dresses, and an ample amount of beads and other handmade jewelry. An unwritten code of conduct and procedure applied. Trading was a crucial part of the art fair unwritten constitution. The food vendors were no exception. Jessie had spotted some pottery a few booths down, sitting on the side shelf of the funnel cake makers. No money changed hands. There was enough to be had from the island patrons and tourists

flocking the boardwalk. Some of the vendors read books during the GrimaldisGrimaldisbetween customers. She knew her book about yogis and not a romance novel would be the book of choice by a vendor during a slow wave of customers. Their lack of worldly goods made Jessie conclude that *yoga couple* had already read it and were practicing its teachings. Jessie just wasn't there yet. She mentally added yoga to her list, right after dog.

Jessie finished the tea and candy bar and then tied her hair back away from her face. She donned her sunglasses and hat and grabbed her beach chair along with her book and walked along the wooden steps over the dune. She situated herself a few yards back from the ocean. She looked intently at the picture of the dark skinned Indian man with piercing brown eyes on the cover for a moment before opening the book. Chapter One.