

## Wildwood Awakening

### Chapter One

When she was little, Toni was certain their house was haunted. She heard footsteps at night—footsteps of someone who wasn't there. Her grandmother had to keep a night-light burning, or she could see shadowy figures in the corners of the ceiling.

Eventually, she accepted that she had "an active imagination" and that the figures and the sounds were simply in her vivid fantasy world. But she remained fascinated by the idea of ghosts and otherworldly things.

When she was nine, she found and read one of her father's books on reincarnation, and a new level of fear and awe set in. Awe because she had always been certain that she had existed somehow *before* she was Toni Johnson, before she was in *this* body. Fear because she had no specific memories and she dreaded the possibility of remembering something horrible.

Later she read about the great psychic Edgar Cayce and wished she, too, could be psychic. But she knew she wasn't. She just had an overactive imagination. She was certain she had no special powers.

Now, at age fifteen on a sparkling June morning, Toni was going to meet her best friend Katy and go to the beach. They would probably run into Mark and Chris and Barbi and James and the six of them would spend the afternoon between surf and boardwalk.

Katy was waiting for Toni at the bus stop on Cresse Avenue. The two girls headed toward the beach and boardwalk four blocks east.

"Did I tell you what happened to Linda?" Katy asked.

"No, what?"

Katy went on to tell of her older sister's experience at the Taco Hut with a very rude customer.

"So, when she took the food out to the table, she 'accidentally' tripped and the tacos landed right in that awful woman's lap!"

"Accidentally on purpose," Toni laughed.

"Look, there's Mark!"

Leaning against the boardwalk railing, his back to the sea stood Mark Montell. His shoulder-length brown hair was shot through with blond streaks; by the end of summer he would be almost completely blond. He had a strong nose, a square jaw, and his eyes were squinted against the sun. He hadn't seen the girls yet, and he tossed his hair back from his face with a quick whip of his head. Toni thrilled at the sight of him.

"He is so cute!" she told Katy.

"Yeah, he's cute, I guess. But I like James better."

"Speak of the devil..." Toni said, as James emerged from the arcade and joined Mark at the railing. The girls approached them.

James was the first to greet them in his effusive way. “Hey, ladies! Well, a fine day just got even better.”

James, too, had long hair, but dark and wavy. His Italian background gave him an exotic, romantic look. He was quick to smile, quick to compliment with an easy charm.

He leaned in toward the girls, conspiratorially. “Look what I got,” he said in a dramatic whisper. He briefly opened his fist to give them a flash of the joint he had.

“Let’s go under the boardwalk and smoke it.”

“Are Barbi and Chris coming?” Katy asked. “Maybe we should wait for them.”

“No worries. I’ve got more.” James assured them.

They bounded down the twenty-six steps to the sand. A mile across the beach they could see the waves washing ashore and the lines of umbrellas. The delighted shrieks of children wafted in on the wind. Wildwood had the widest beach in the world.

Under the boardwalk, the sand was cool and slightly damp beneath the surface. The sounds of the boardwalk—people talking, laughing, the dings and clangs of games, the roar of the roller coaster—were muffled. It felt like a secret place. From here one could watch the people above, eavesdrop on their conversations, like some exotic spy.

Sometimes there was money to be found there, coins mostly, that had fallen between the cracks. The four friends were under the newest part of the boardwalk, recently reconstructed using the wood from the inauguration platform of President Nixon.

James fished a lighter from the pocket of his Hawaiian shirt. He wore jeans and Jesus sandals. Mark had his shirt tied around his waist, his chest and long legs bare. He was barefoot. Mark stretched out on the sand, leaning on one elbow, and tossed his hair over his shoulder again. Toni sat in the sand next to him. She was wearing her new black shorts and a scoop necked shirt, a sort of soft orange with black trim. She had her bathing suit on beneath and wore flip-flops.

Katy was a plump girl, and she was wearing cut-off jeans shorts and a red-and-white checked sleeveless shirt. She, too, was barefoot, and her unruly hair curled wildly around her freckled Irish face.

The sunlight slanted in lines across their faces as they passed the joint around. Mark stood up and exhaled upward through the slats in the boards.

“Don’t! You’ll get us busted,” Toni said.

“By the time they get down here, we’ll be long gone,” he replied, plopping back to the sand.

“Don’t worry, girl,” he said and stroked Toni’s long dark hair. “They can’t catch me!”

The afternoon got dreamy for Toni, and she reveled in his little attention. The grass was creeper weed; its effect came on slowly and gently and soon the four were laughing like crazy over some trifle.

A middle-aged couple came down the stair just after they finished. The man, in shorts and a Hawaiian shirt, wore a straw sunhat. His feet were clad in black-strapped sandals, and he wore his black socks. The teenagers struggled to keep quiet and when he and his fat wife in an enormous mou-mou had

dragged their beach chairs out of earshot, the four rolled in the sand, clutching their bellies with laughter.

“A fucking shoebie!” Mark said, and they laughed all over again, until the girls had tears rolling down their cheeks.

“Let’s go for a swim!” James suggested and the four burst out into the sunlight, racing one another to the water.

Mark arrived first, dropping his shirt in the sand and splashing quickly out to dive into the waves. James removed his jeans and shirt and folded them neatly next to his sandals. Katy whistled at him in his blue striped bathing suit. “Nice ass!”

James laughed and strolled into the surf. Toni cast off her shorts and shirts and ran shrieking into the water, which always felt tundra cold initially. Mark had swum out beyond the breakers and beyond the necessity of sharing the ocean with little kids.

Katy waded in, shorts and all and swam out past Mark. Toni and James bobbed up and down with the incoming waves, still shallow enough to keep one’s feet on the bottom.

“Aren’t you going to swim out with him?” James asked.

“No, I don’t go in over my head. I’m not a very good swimmer,” Toni told him. What she did not tell him was that she had always been afraid of the water and even going in over her waist was an accomplishment only recently mastered. But she could not tolerate putting her head under water or being out beyond where she could touch bottom.

“Probably drowned in a past life, huh?” James commented. It made Toni feel a special fondness for him. He was just mystical enough to validate many of her inklings.

Suddenly, Toni was pulled under the water, and a surge of panic pumped through her. She broke the surface, flailing and screaming, pushing quickly toward the beach. She turned to see what had happened and saw Mark standing there, grinning.

“What?” he asked, splashing water in her direction. “I’m just playing!”

“Don’t do that,” Toni shouted at him. “You freaked me out, man!”

“Cool your heels, woman.” He seemed irritated and swam off beyond the breakers again.

“You OK, Tone?” Katy approached and asked Toni who was standing now in knee-deep water. The waves splashed up her thighs and belly, but now the sea breeze was making her shiver.

“Yeah, he just scared me. I don’t like to get my face wet!” Toni jogged back to her clothes and dug a towel out of her bag. Wrapping herself in it, she sat and watched her three friends dunking each other in the surf.

Soon the sun had warmed her back up and she sat back and watched the beachgoers. All along the length of the beach, as far as anyone could see, were people. Umbrellas, beach chairs, beach blankets, balls, floatie toys, shrieking children, castle-builders, picnickers, young lovers, barking dogs and chaotic families crowded the beach. It was early in the season, but once Memorial Day had arrived, the town

swelled to nearly ten times its winter population. Between Memorial Day and Labor Day, the Wildwoods (North Wildwood, Wildwood and Wildwood Crest) were choked with summer visitors. The streets crawled with cars; it was faster to walk anywhere. The sidewalks along Pacific Avenue, where many of the shops and restaurants were located were crowded in the afternoons and evenings. The boardwalk groaned beneath the weight of skateboarders, baby strollers, bicycles, walkers, shoppers, and tram cars.

On the beach was the fresh smell of the North Atlantic, that temperamental bitch. Mingled with the scent of fish and salt and seaweed were the fragrances of suntan lotions, and sunblock—coconut oil, baby oil, jojoba oil. The beach was crowded with colors, stripes of all stripes, people of all colors including the lobster-red of sunburn. The sound of the crowd subsided to murmurs when Toni laid down on her towel, her back to the sky, her head in her arms. The rhythmic surge of the surf combined with the muffled white noise of the crowd and soon Toni was drifting off to sleep.

“She’s sleeping!” Mark yelled to the others, standing over her, dripping cold seawater onto her sun-warmed back.

“Not now,” Toni complained.

“I’m hungry,” said Katy. “Let’s get something to eat.”

Together, the group put on their dry clothes (except for Katy who was content to be simply sun-dried). They meandered along the shoreline for a couple of blocks before returning to the boardwalk to seek out their favorite pizza-by-the-slice joint.

