

Wildwood Awakening

Chapter Two

The afternoon shadows grew long and pointed to the sea. Six shadows in a loose cluster shifted over rippled sands. To their left danced the lengthening shadow points of beach grasses. The sand here was softer, less packed. They had left behind the noises of the beach and the boardwalk. Walking north along the island's seaward edge, they were walking toward Anglesea, a little spit of land that stuck straight north from the tip of Wildwood Island, pointing toward Stone Harbor across Hereford's Inlet.

Between the end of the boardwalk and here, Mark had pulled Toni into the dunes and kissed her, deeply, passionately. Now she glowed with young love, her arms around his waist, his long arm draped loosely across her shoulders.

They had run into Barbi and Chris at the Pizza Palace #6, then enjoyed another joint beneath the northern end of the boardwalk. Buzzed, with full bellies, the kids were feeling languid in the afternoon sun. Barbi and Katy were in the lead, gossiping about other mutual friends. Chris, handsome and clever and a year younger than the others tagged along behind. Soon, though, James dropped back and they were talking quietly in the rear. Toni and Mark were smiling, Mark gazing off into the distance, Toni gazing up at Mark.

The beach, which they had been following roughly northeast, began to turn, and ran for a few hundred yards almost due west before returning to true north. A large dune hid the turn from view and as they passed it, Toni suddenly stopped and pulled away from Mark.

"Uhhh..." she groaned, as though she were nauseated. She bent over at the waist, resting her hands on her thighs, dropping her bag into the sand.

"You OK, babe?" Mark asked her.

"Yeah. No. I don't know."

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know. I feel...sick and kind of dizzy...like I'm going to..." She dropped into a sudden heap.

Flashes of darkness were interrupted with lances of fear, of adrenaline, a face in shadows, a sense of choking. Coughing brought Toni back and she opened her eyes.

The others rushed to her aid.

"Toni!" Katy called.

Toni sat up partway, holding her head with one hand, leaning on the other.

"Did you faint?" Katy asked.

"I don't know. I just feel so weak, and scared! What's wrong with me?"

Katy and Mark helped her to her feet, then in an act of unaccustomed gallantry, Mark scooped Toni into his arms.

“Grab her bag,” he instructed Katy. Toni rested her head on his shoulder, her arms around his neck.

Walking quickly now, the group made a beeline for the nearest street and soon found themselves on Anglesea Drive. Once they left the beach, Toni began to feel better. Soon, she asked Mark to put her down and let her walk.

“You’re sure you’re OK?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. I’m better now. Must have been a bad piece of pizza or something.”

The group continued on to the apartment where Toni lived with her father. Dad was still at work, so they sat around the living room, smoking yet another joint before the other five began to drift off toward home. Mark lived around the corner in the same apartment complex, as did Chris and Barbi. Katy lived in Wildwood Crest and went to take the last evening Five-Mile Transit bus.

Alone, Katy cooked a burger and curled up in front of the TV. She still felt weak, but the fear had subsided. The setting sun cast a deep red light across the commons—the stretch of lawn between this row of apartments and the next. The young trees planted in the raised planters pointed long fingers to the east, and gull shadows wheeled and whirled across the green lawn. Toni soon fell asleep on the couch, the TV watching her.

Behind a large, grass-covered dune at the end of North Wildwood, where the beach turns, lay the body of a young woman, swelling in the sun, buzzing with flies. Her eyes were open and staring at the darkening sky. Before complete dark, a local resident walking his dog discovered her and soon the location swarmed with officials, searchlights scanning the grasses and shore long into the summer night.