

## **Brief Author's Note**

This Epilogue almost didn't happen. First of all, the idea for it didn't hit me until well after the final draft of *Wave* was completed and the formal pages were being designed (i.e., too late to add it without considerable time, effort, and expense). Also, I labored over its potential impact due to the complexity of the character upon which it is centered. And on a more pedestrian level, I somehow lost the electronic file after I'd written it, and I couldn't find a hard copy anywhere although I'd printed several. (Long story short, a friend of mine still had one that I'd given him for review. Ironically, it, too, was almost lost—he had to rush home from work to save it from the garbage truck, which was literally two blocks away.)

This was nothing more than an afterthought. The idea and images came to mind one day, and I deemed them interesting enough to offer. But since this section is not an “official” part of the *Wave* canon, you, the reader, have the handy option of either accepting or ignoring it. It's like an “outtake”; the literary equivalent of those extra bits and pieces of music you get on bootlegged recordings of your favorite bands (e.g., the bulk of the material on the Beatles' three *Anthology* compilations). Curious and noteworthy, but not necessarily to be viewed with the same import as everything else. It's entirely up to you.

We're just trying to have a little fun here.

## Epilogue

Maui, February 2017

A gurney surrounded by three EMTs and one physician crashed into the emergency room at Maui Memorial Medical Center in downtown Wailuku. The patient, on his back and unconscious, was a male in his mid-sixties. He was deeply tanned and wore an ensemble of gaudy gold jewelry. The necklace and medallion that normally resided in his thatch of silver chest hair had been removed and stuffed into the pocket of his khaki shorts. His shirt had been ripped open and a variety of wires and patches attached to his torso.

They landed in treatment room # 7.

“Electrocardiogram?” the doctor asked, thumbing up the patient’s eyelids.

“Doing it now,” one the EMTs replied, setting up the machinery.

“Do we know anything about this guy? History? Anything?”

“No. I couldn’t even find ID on him,” said another. He was a young man of no more than 25 or 26, but he had a reputation around the hospital as someone who had his head on straight. “No wallet, nothing.”

The doctor, a small Asian man with perfectly groomed hair, checked one of the screens and said, “Atropine, right away. His heart rate’s dropping. Let’s *go!*”

He was handed a syringe, which he stuck into the man’s chest without hesitation. As the fluid ran in, the doctor watched the vital signs.

No improvement. Less than a minute later, he flatlined.

“Christ, cardiac arrest. *Defib!*”

The bright young EMT anticipated this and was standing by with the pads. They were immediately applied.

“Go!”

Two hundred joules blasted through the limp body, which responded with a spasmodic jerk. There was no change on the screen.

“Again!”

The body jerked again, and then once more.

“*Nitro!*”

Another injection, more waiting. Nothing changed. The only sound in the room was the unbroken electronic note issued by the EKG.

The mystery patient was officially pronounced dead at 11:14 A.M.

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It took Marty Amaka, a veteran detective on Wailuku's police force, almost two weeks to put the puzzle together. He started at the location where the heart attack occurred—Club Keoki, on Hookahi Street. Keoki was a quiet, respectable place with candlelit booths and soft piano music. There was lots of bamboo furniture and potted plants.

The bartender, Jack, another area long timer, said the guy came in about three or four times a week. He was friendly enough, but he rarely spoke to anyone. He sat on the same stool in the quietest corner of the bar—next to the mirrored wall and almost totally obscured by darkness—and had a few vodka tonics. The timing of his visits was unpredictable, giving Jack the impression he was unemployed. But he looked fit and tan, and he always had money, so he wasn't poor. Maybe a wealthy retiree; there were enough of those around. He usually wore sandals, shorts, and a dress shirt mostly unbuttoned and with the sleeves rolled up.

One morning when business was slow and only the two of them were there, Jack tried talking to him. Even though this was almost a year ago, he told Amaka that he remembered it clearly. The guy seemed hesitant at first, as if he was hiding something. Jack eventually got a name—Albert Rhodes—and the fact that Rhodes enjoyed going to the beach.

After this initial breakthrough they would chitchat from time to time, but Jack noticed the topics were always innocuous, neutral. "Safe," he called them. However, he did recall one time when Rhodes complained about having to paint the bathroom in his apartment because his landlord wouldn't pay a professional to do it. Rhodes didn't give the name of the complex, and Jack figured it would be pointless to ask.

Armed with only this information, Amaka did a search of apartments within a reasonable driving distance of Club Keoki and found the name Albert Rhodes listed as a tenant in Paradise Gardens, in Kihei, about 10 miles away. Paradise Gardens seemed to match Rhodes's reported character perfectly—pleasant, quiet, and low-key, with a hint of class and privilege. The surrounding

streets were caringly landscaped, and residents had easy access to everything from shopping facilities to winding bicycle trails. The view of the mountains from his balcony was breathtaking. Yeah, Amaka thought, this guy had a little money.

A detailed search of the apartment surprised him in that, like the bartender's conversations with Rhodes, it revealed very little. There were all the normal things you'd expect to find in any home—food, clothes, some basic island decor, and, hidden inside an old stereo console, a wad of bills with a rubber band around them. But other things were notably absent—no pictures of family or friends, no letters, no notes. It was as if Rhodes had never forged a relationship in his life. And even though Paradise Gardens offered free cable Internet access, Rhodes didn't have a computer, either. That meant no e-mails and no hard drive to search. Amaka also couldn't find any trace of personal identification, such as a driver's license or a credit card.

A conversation with the superintendent proved fruitless. Raymond Chong basically echoed the bartender's sentiments—Rhodes was quiet but friendly, came and went at erratic hours, and didn't seem to have a job or any acquaintances. He paid his rent on time and in full, and only complained when necessary. All in all, a very good tenant. He tipped Chong generously at Christmas, and he usually included a few presents for Chong's children. But other than that, the man was almost like a ghost.

Amaka continued his frustrating investigation in the usual way—talking to Rhodes's neighbors, visiting the supermarket where he shopped, etc. He wasn't surprised to learn that the social security number Rhodes supplied on his apartment application was false. It belonged to a deceased woman from New Jersey. A national search of his name turned up no one who fit the description or was reported missing. And Amaka continued to be puzzled by the fact that no one had come forward to claim the body. A check of Rhodes's phone records indicated that the only number he ever called was the Chinese food place near the apartment.

Two days before Amaka planned to close the case and order Rhodes's body cremated, he struck gold. He didn't think there would be a bank account for Rhodes anywhere, but he discovered a safe-deposit box at Hawaii National Bank. He obtained a court order to have it opened, and was stunned to find just one item inside—a sealed enveloped with a Post-It note attached. The message was written in Rhodes's shaky script—*Upon my death, please forward this to Thomas Sinclair Wilson, Long Beach Island, New Jersey.*

By law, the deceased's wish had to be granted. Amaka made one copy of the contents in the event that the letter didn't reach its intended recipient, then read through it once for the sake of the investigation. After so many years in his business, he thought he'd seen everything. But, once again, he found himself speechless. After the shock wore off, he wrote a brief cover letter, stuck a stamp on the envelope, and had it sent by registered mail.

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Tom Wilson had finally found love in the summer of 2009. Her name was Barbara, and she was a paralegal who worked in the same firm where he had taken a job less than a year after the tsunami. They lived a quiet, ordinary life on a suburban grid less than five miles from the island. They had two dogs and enjoyed taking them hiking through the Pine Barrens. Tom's interest in New Jersey history had grown over the years, and he visited various landmarks to take pictures and gather stories from locals, which he thought about compiling in a book. He didn't have much involvement in local politics anymore, although he would receive consultation calls from time to time. He rarely visited the island, as the memories were too painful.

He was standing in front of a tall bookcase in his study on the morning of Saturday, February 9, when Barbara came in with the day's mail. Holding a steaming mug of tea in his hand, he glanced over at her and said, "Anything good, or more junk?"

"Mostly flyers and some bills," she replied. "Plus this ... something for you from Hawaii."

He turned, mildly interested. "Hawaii? A vacation brochure?"

"No," she said, handing it to him. "It's from the Wailuku Police Department."

"Wailuku Police? What on Earth could they possibly want? I've never even heard of Wailuku."

"Are you sure? Is there something you're not telling me, Thomas?" She smiled and stroked the back of his head. "If that really is your name."

He smiled back "Ah yes, the truth finally comes to the surface. Hmm ... this is really strange."

Barbara headed back out. "Well, let me know if I need to purchase a bail bond for you. Otherwise, I'll be in the kitchen."

“Right.”

He drifted to his leather chair, which stood behind a huge L-shaped desk covered with folders and papers. He found the silver letter opener and sliced through the top. Inside was a cover note with the police department emblem at the top. It was from a Detective Marty Amaka, summarizing his investigation into the background of a recently deceased John Doe that led to the discovery of a sealed envelope in a safe-deposit box with a note requesting that it be forwarded upon his death.

Wilson removed the mystery man’s envelope and laid it on the glass surface of his desk. He studied it just as he had studied the first envelope. It had no writing or printing on it, nothing that hinted at its contents. Then he turned it over. The Post-It note was still attached, and as Wilson recognized the handwriting, every physiological function in his body ceased.

“Oh my God ... Oh my *God..*”

His hands shaking, he slit it open. Inside were two pages, college ruled and legal length, and covered with more of the same unforgettable script. Over the next two minutes, his attention was focused as it had never been before—

June 18, 2010

Dear Tom,

If you’re reading this letter, then it’s because I’ve passed away recently. *Really* passed away this time. That’s right—I didn’t die in the tsunami that struck Long Beach Island back in May of 2006. As you are probably aware, I was looking for a missing *SandPaper* photographer named Mark White at the Forsythe Refuge when the waves hit. My plan was for both of us to hide in one of those big pipes the DEP made us install. Unfortunately, I never found him. I looked as long as I could, but time just ran out. When I heard about the young man’s death later on, I cried. I wish there was more I could have done.

Sitting in that pipe listening to the water roar around me was the most terrifying incident of my life. Even though it was anchored by steel bolts and concrete, it shook like mad. Like the way a plane does when it

lands—as if it’s going to bust apart at any moment. It would’ve been a fitting end for me, I suppose, but somehow it didn’t happen.

I waited about two hours before coming out, just to be sure it was safe. When I pushed up that lid, I was met by the sight of total devastation. There was about six feet of water everywhere, and most of the houses were gone. The few that remained that I could see were in ruins. Debris was floating everywhere—bicycles, beds, refrigerators. A transformer at the top of a broken phone pole was spitting sparks. I absorbed all of this in a matter of seconds, and it blew me away. From where I was, I could just see the Boulevard—and sheer destruction. Miles and miles of it. That image is still as clear in my mind as the day I saw it.

Once I regained some ability to think, it occurred to me that I was facing an opportunity—rather than go back and stand trial (in a case where I was clearly guilty) and suffer a lifetime of shame and public admonishment, I could escape. I could take off, find a new life, and put the old one behind me. The odds of making it were slim, I knew, but the alternative.... Tom, put yourself in my shoes and think about the alternative. That’ll help you understand how I could’ve done what I did. Before you judge me, try to think about it from that perspective.

I started swimming southward, following the shoreline. I was always a good swimmer, but it was slow going due to all the debris. I made it through about a half mile of it, including the grisly discovery of two corpses. I kept swimming until I found a row of beach houses that were still standing. It was dark by then, and once again I committed a crime—I broke in to one of them. I was starving, and there wasn’t any food in the refrigerator, but I found an unopened bag of pretzels and some cans of soda in a cabinet. A real feast. The electricity and water were both on, so I took a hot shower and washed my clothes as best I could. Then I went to sleep for a few hours. I woke up around four in the morning, and when I looked out one of the second floor windows, I could see LBI burning in the distance. It was like a scene from Hell. Then were

so many emotions running through me that I felt paralyzed. I stared for what seemed like hours, watching those orange flames surrounded by blackness. I imagined the bodies—the innocent victims and all their possessions. Everything they owned. Everything. Their whole world. *My* world. All of it gone in a matter of hours. The day before, our greatest concerns were getting to work, paying the bills, taking care of our loved ones, and trying to find a little happiness. One day later....

I knew I could still go back. As I watched I realized I could simply go to a pay phone, place one call, and I'd be in the thick of it again. Maybe they'd write stories about me—about how I heroically tried to save Mark White while risking my own skin. Maybe that would redeem me in some people's eyes. That would have almost allowed me to pick up and continue with my political career. At least I'm sure it would've helped. But that's another reason why I decided not to return—I would not have deserved any of it, and my redemption would've been at the cost of other people's lives. I could not have accepted that. Besides, in the big picture, I thought LBI would be better off without me. All these years later, I'm still comfortable with that assessment.

I had nearly a thousand dollars in cash on me. You remember how I always liked to carry plenty around, right? (A love for the green was always my tragic weakness, as you well know.) And I was fortunate in that my wallet was still in my pocket. I tossed everything but the cash—wallet and all my credit cards, ID, etc.—into a public garbage can later on. It turned out to be a symbolic gesture.

I sat down in the living room of this little house. It was pitch black and as silent as a church. I sat there until the sun came up over the beach, thinking about what I was going to do. It's funny—there probably isn't a person in the world who doesn't think about escaping their life once or twice, but when you're really faced with the possibility, it's an entirely different matter. All of a sudden here I was, standing at a crossroad trying to figure out which route to take, and the idea of being

able to leave my life behind was an actual option. It was frightening and exciting at the same time. I began to shake when I started piecing the details together in my mind. I stayed in that house all the next day, knowing perfectly well that someone could drop in at any moment. But they didn't, and by nightfall I had the plan together.

I got dressed again, combed my hair differently, removed my glasses, and went out to find a pay phone so I could call a cab. I figured the driver wouldn't recognize me, and he didn't. Just some guy earning a living. He talked a little bit about the disaster, but I didn't want to chat too much in case he recognized my voice. I asked him to go west, out to Freehold and away from everything. From there I took another cab all the way to Newark Airport, where I bought a one-way ticket. I went first to California, then to Maui. You remember how much I always loved Hawaii, right? As soon as I landed, I was back in a cab—this time to the nearest hotel. I spent all of my remaining cash on the room, some clothes, and a few decent meals. They had Internet access, and I followed the LBI story every day. I kept crying, too, off and on for weeks.

When my immediate cash ran out, I had to tap an offshore account I've kept for years. You never knew about it. Truth be told, old friend, people like me always have secrets. Even when we trust others, even when we love them, we have secrets. We need to. Since I'm not a psychologist I can't explain the reasoning behind this. Something to do with keeping a part of yourself out of public view. When you're a politician, the voters think they own every inch of you. It's important to be able to keep *something* for yourself. But it's more than that, too, I'm sure.

I had a sizable quantity of cash in this account that, I was certain, no one knew about. I'd opened it after I was sure my wife had decided to seek a divorce. I simply wasn't going to let her take half of everything and bring me to my knees. She never earned a damn cent of it in the first place.

So, armed with plenty of cash and all the time in the world, I began life anew. I grew a beard, took to wearing sandals, and created a new identity—Mr. Albert Rhodes. I taught myself how to cook and found a part-time job in a tourist restaurant. I spent my off hours playing golf or tanning on the beach. It's amazing how easily you can transform yourself, simply amazing. With the proper motivation, I swear a person can do just about anything.

I didn't make a lot of friends in my new life, but I made some. I fell into a comfortable routine, and the person I used to be slowly began to fade. When the first anniversary of my arrival in Maui came around, I found I could no longer remember certain things about my old life. By the end of the third or fourth year, I was Albert Rhodes for good. I couldn't have gone back to being Donald Harper if I'd wanted to. He really was dead by then.

And with him went so much of the guilt. I will always feel bad about the fact that I couldn't find Mark White. And I will always grieve for all the other residents who died. But I didn't cause the disaster, and I know I did my best to get as many people to safety as I could. At some point I stopped punishing myself for what happened. When that moment finally arrived, I felt like a pallet of cinder blocks had been lifted off my back. The nightmares finally stopped, too—the horrifying images, both real and imagined, of that ugly day, which jarred me from a thousand nights' sleep. At last the burden was gone, and my mind was clear. All the old issues had been resolved.

Except one—you.

For as long as I've been here, not a single day has gone by without my thinking of our friendship in some way. So many others have come and gone, and I now see how meaningless most of them were. But you were always in a different category—loyal, honest, forthright. You only left my side after being betrayed by my dishonesty. I understood that, and I never took it personally. If I had been in your position I probably

would have done the same.

So I made a decision—I wanted you to know what really happened. I trusted you when I was alive, so I'll trust you now that I'm gone. Now that you know the truth, do with it as you see fit. If you want to condemn me, that's okay. But at least you know. Some may say my decision to come here was selfish. Perhaps. But if you look at where I was at the time, you might not find it so hard to understand. When LBI was destroyed, I decided to let my misery be destroyed with it. And just as LBI has been rebuilt, so has my soul.

Hopefully we're both better off.

Take care,

Donald