

Excerpt from *Playback Effect* by Karen A. Wyle

[NOTE: this excerpt begins in the middle of Chapter 3. An explosion, originating in a sculpture created by Hal Wakeman, has killed fourteen people and injured dozens more, among them Hal's wife Wynne. Hal has been accused of the crime.]

Tertius Shaw pondered the latest news as he squeezed his morning orange juice. Naturally, in the absence of the actual perpetrator it was necessary to produce a scapegoat—and it seemed one had already been found. Mr. Wakeman should be flattered to be named the author of so dramatic an event.

Tertius finished squeezing the juice and carried the glass to his breakfast nook. The sunlight streaming in backlit the juice; he relished its intense orange color. The toaster oven pinged as he set down the glass. Tertius extracted the bagel, slathered on a liberal portion of truffle-infused cream cheese, and settled in to enjoy himself.

Was it too soon to plan his next project? He may as well begin. He could stretch out the early phases as much as he liked, let the populace relax somewhat before jerking the chain once again.

Tertius took a judiciously sized bite of his bagel and washed it down with the tart, tangy juice.

What a very lovely morning it was!

“The problem is, you could have set it up ahead of time—even way ahead, when you installed the sculpture. So it doesn't matter how many alibis you have: you're bound to have some time unaccounted for. . . .”

Hal listened to his lawyer tell him all the ways he was up the proverbial creek. It didn't sound as if they had many paddles available.

“You haven't been spending much time with people as a couple, so we're short on current character witnesses—at least, favorable ones. The prosecution seems to have dug up a couple of their own. And we're stuck with the new anti-terrorism procedures, so we can't file a motion for change of venue to a different county, or get a continuance until Wynne is able to testify.”

Somehow, despite the noose contracting around him, he found time to mourn the destruction of the fountain. It had been his biggest public contract, at the time—a real game-changer, a paradigm shift for his career as an artist. And Wynne liked it so much. . . . That dream of hers, the one she tried to describe to him: he had the thoroughly irrational conviction that if only he had shown interest in the dream and let her try to share it with him, then maybe they could have joined together somehow to protect the sculpture. He had abandoned it spiritually, and Wynne was too weak to protect it on her own. . . .

Was Bitsy feeling abandoned? They had never boarded her before. He had forgotten about her for hours after his arrest: she must have been horribly bewildered, with dinnertime passing unheeded, her water bowl empty, no one heeding her whines When he finally remembered, only the luck of a dog-loving jailer had allowed Hal to arrange for his father to go and fetch her. (Fetch. Ha ha.) Was his father up to taking care

of her? What havoc might she wreak, without walks and games to exhaust her energy, and how would his father respond? . . .

“From their witness list, it’s hard to tell whether they’re saying you tried to kill your wife, or whether you were making some twisted artistic statement, or both.”

The first few times the idea had been mentioned, he had erupted, turning his fury on the hapless messenger, even lunging toward the lawyer on one occasion. But now, the accusation that he had meant to cripple or kill his wife could barely rouse him from dazed lethargy.

He had to stop drifting like this. He had to do something to help his lawyer, to help himself. But only this strange detachment, like a ringing in his ears blocking out unwelcome noises, kept him from unendurable terror.

Nothing made sense; nothing was as it should be. Wynne kept trying to awaken from dreams, only to find she had been awake already; or she believed she was awake, and proved to be dreaming. Waking and dreaming were more alike than they had ever been: in this place, she could control neither.

She had seen a child, a child with its mother, and everything around them had been bright and joyful, and then something terrible had happened. What had happened? Where was the child, and where the mother?

She closed her eyes and tried to dream that she was well and whole; without pain, with Hal. She almost achieved it, but it all fell apart again, swept away in dust and noise and fire.

Could she possibly have used her hands in dreaming? It seemed so unlikely; but a part of her was missing, and at the same time, another essential part of her was gone or broken.

She worried about Hal. Something must be wrong. If not, he would be here. He might, perhaps, have found some way to suggest that this was really her fault, at least a little; but he would be here. She had a dim sort of notion that he had been, at least once, but it might have been just another muddled dream.

Could he have been caught in the explosion, perhaps hurrying up to meet her just as the bomb went off? Was he somewhere in this hospital, alone like her, needing her as she was needing him?

Wynne became aware that she was awake, and that not far away, people were talking. She could feel the pain waking as well, and if she had some way to summon a nurse, she could not find it. Were those nurses talking, and how far away were they, and could she find the strength to make a noise?

Then she caught a fragment of what one of them was saying—or had she misheard? Had the nurse said Hal’s name? She strained to hear more, even as the buzzing of an electric wheelchair in the hall, and then the rattling of a cart, intermittently obscured the words.

“ . . . believe he would . . . his own . . . ”

“ . . . what’s coming to him . . . know what it feels . . . ”

She managed to force an ugly, honking call of distress. The gossiping ended

abruptly; a nurse came hurrying over. “You poor dear! It’s time for your medication again, isn’t it? Here, I’ll run and get it.” She moved away again before Wynne could begin to form a question; but as she passed the other nurse, she murmured something and shook her head.

Wynne must have misunderstood. It had sounded as if they were blaming Hal for the explosion. No one could have thought such a thing! Or maybe none of this was happening. Maybe it was a nightmare. But she never had nightmares.

And then the nurse was back with an injector, and sleep flooded over Wynne again, a blanket of sleep too thick for dreams.

Chapter 4

“For better or worse, it is beyond my power to decree the ending of your life, as you ended the lives of fourteen of your fellows. Our civilization has chosen to hold itself to standards far higher than the standards of those who come before such tribunals as this.

“But technological progress has made it possible, without the brutality of ages past, to impose a punishment that in some respects fits the heinous offenses of which you have been found guilty. With a precision unavailable to the Medieval sheriff or beadle, we can ensure that you suffer the full measure of the anguish you inflicted on others. And while you may deserve more, this is most assuredly suffering that you deserve.”

Hal found that he was nodding. The judge must have noticed: his face seemed to swell, and turned so red that Hal feared for the man’s health. No doubt he interpreted Hal’s gesture as mockery; but if only the judge had been describing some other man’s crimes and deserts, Hal would have wholeheartedly agreed.

They had strapped Hal down, binding every limb and every part of him that could conceivably be used to struggle. Efficient technicians glued electrodes all over him, while chatting to each other as if manning an assembly line or washing a car. Every once in a while, though, one of them would take a quick glance at him. When he was writhing—or trying to writhe, twisting against the restraints—and howling in borrowed agony, would they finally look at him, in licentious enjoyment of his suffering, or even in reluctant sympathy?

His lawyer could have been there, but he could not have brought his tablet or other devices—and Hal needed him to be spending every remaining second trying to get a pardon, a stay, any possible kind of reprieve.

In some bizarre gesture of counterfeit consideration, they had asked Hal whose suffering he wished to experience first. That had been a simple enough choice. There would be no redeeming value, no conceivable silver lining, to any vicarious experience but one.

At least, in this delayed and useless manner, he could share Wynne’s pain.

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Pavel Medved tried not to fidget. The governor’s receptionist was no doubt tasked with reporting the behavior of those who were waiting to see him. He would have tried not to sweat, as well, but as that was beyond his powers, he had doubled his antiperspirant and dressed to conceal any failures of the same.

They could be hooking Hal up any time now. He had a contact on the “medical” staff—now there was a misnomer—who might slow things down a little, if he could do so with no risk of detection, but they could hardly count on much help from that quarter. Especially since that contact was happily married, and probably thought Hal deserved everything that was coming to him.

Ten victims. That was the maximum sentence, and that’s what Hal had received. Ten separate plunges into the sensory and emotional experience of agonized, terrified,

possibly despairing victims—victims, quite likely, of someone else’s crime. If this is what it felt like to have a possibly innocent client, he was just as glad he had so few of them.

Most of the media had happily gone along with the prosecution narrative. If Hal had any projects in progress, they would no doubt be canceled. It would be quite a task to rehabilitate his image, even if Pavel could rescue him from the most immediate peril. He knew a publicist or two who might take on the job, if Hal would only cooperate. Hal did not strike Pavel as the cooperative type—but an ordeal like this one would change any man.

Anyway, Pavel had worked harder than he had ever worked in his life, and the tide was starting to turn. Hal’s father had been an enormous help, once Hal had grudgingly agreed to bring him into the loop. It was thanks to Harold Wakeman Sr. that Pavel was sitting here sweating in the governor’s antechamber, and that a few reporters had started to listen to his side of things. He had the advance copy with him of a story about the miscarriage of justice in Hal’s case, and another about serial killers who had gone free for years or decades because others were falsely accused. The governor had a nose for shifting winds. He might just come through.

Pavel walked slowly out of the governor’s office, barely able to pick up his feet as he went. He had succeeded beyond his expectations, and failed miserably.

The governor had stayed the execution of Hal’s sentence, pending resolution of Pavel’s motions to vacate Hal’s conviction and obtain a new trial. But all the wheedling, flattering, and understated threatening had taken time. Just a little too much time.

Hal had wondered, in morbid moments of waiting, just when the recording had begun. How soon had the technicians reached Wynne? Would she still have been in shock, her body too stunned for the nerves to deliver their first urgent messages? A fellow prisoner had claimed the recording could reach back into short-term memory, starting before any rescue personnel had arrived. Was it true?

Now he had his answer.

BURNING BURNING BURNING my arm (whose arm who am I) my arm my arm my arm burning burning

throbbing back something threw me to the ground my back something wrong broken?? MyARM MYARM BURNING

something wrong with the air try to breathe can't breathe smoke all the air is smoke

Something wet on my face smell kitchen smell blood oh god blood all over my face in my nose smelling my own blood

I can't move THE AIR SO HOT Is a fire coming?? AM I GOING TO DIE HERE OH GOD oohhhh my head my ARM MY ARM MY ARM

Hal, Hal, where is Hal Hal come find me Hal make it stop HALMAKEITSTOP HAL HELPMEHAL HELPMEHAL PLEASE PLEASE

One of the two technicians standing by to ensure the prisoner's survival dug his elbow into the other one's ribs. The prisoner had stopped screaming. Instead, he was lying very still, moaning, tears streaming down his face.

The emergency phone buzzed. The technician went to answer it, and came back to his companion shaking his head.

"Well, what do you know? It really does happen! A call from the Governor's office! I thought that only happened in the movies."

"What, they're stopping it?"

"Yup. Where's the off button? Does it even have one? It's all programmed ahead of time."

"Hmmm—I think this is it."

The button must have done something: the prisoner kept moaning, but more softly, and he seemed to slump even as he lay prone on the cot.

"Left it a little late, didn't they? Think they'll give him a big kiss and say they're sorry?"

"And the recovery team won't be ready yet. Somebody better get 'em down here on the double."

"You've got to be kidding me."

Hannah moved her hand toward his shoulder, then evidently reconsidered and instead hit a button to print the email. Arthur picked it up, glanced at it, and put it down before he could do anything so melodramatic as crumple it up and throw it across the room.

"Now they say he didn't do it? That son of a bitch could always talk his way out of anything. Did Wynne get him off somehow? And who the hell do they think planted the bomb?"

Hannah smiled a crooked smile. "That's what we're supposed to figure out. Again."

Tertius Shaw read the account of Harold Wakeman's reprieve and chuckled. At least Wakeman had been subjected to playback before that happened. In effect, it increased Tertius' tally for the incident by one.

Had anyone thought to record the experience of a prisoner enduring playback? Such a recording might provide fascinating subtleties for the discerning to appreciate; and more prosaically, it would provide an additional level of deterrence. He would assign a subordinate to write up the recommendation.

His thoughts returned to the released prisoner, the hapless Harold Wakeman (Hapless Harold!). Tertius had done insufficient research last time, or he would have predicted Wakeman's arrest. Next time he would be thoroughly on top of the situation, in more perfect control.