

Dr. Golda Rothman, Social Worker at The New York City Employee Mental Health Service finds her client dead in her office. Searching for kith or kin, she finds corruption, depravity, and murder. Simultaneously, she has a lesbian "awakening."

Triple Exposure

By Patricia Kurtz

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TRIPLE EXPOSURE

Criminal Motivations
Aren't Always What They Seem

PATRICIA KURTZ

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Chapter 1

New York City, Thursday, October 21, 1976

The door to my office with its multiple coats of institutional-green paint was open as usual. On the floor, immediately inside the doorway, lay Hannah Kovacs' ash blonde five-and-dime store wig with its heavy doll-like stitching. This too was not unusual. Hannah always mounted it backwards or sideways, and when she became frustrated at her inability to see through the matted fringe, she flung it against the wall like a quarterback going for the touchdown pass.

Hannah had presented herself in my office at the New York City Employee Mental Health Service every Thursday morning at eleven o'clock for the past six weeks. She had a well-rehearsed routine. Act One was a litany of repetitious complaints about her supervisor, Tom Humboldt and her job as a file clerk at the New York City Department of Public Property. Act Two spiraled into a loud and strident demand that I certify her for disability benefits which I had neither the power nor inclination to do. Act Three was a dramatic tour de force in which she feigned a narcoleptic attack, falling from her chair and tumbling to the floor like a pile of carelessly stacked books.

The first time it happened, I thought she'd suffered a heart attack. I bent over her inert body to administer an unpracticed version of CPR based on recall from a television show, but before I could loosen her collar, I noticed a withered paperback, *Living with Narcolepsy*, tightly clutched in her left hand. For a fleeting moment, I thought Hannah was an undiagnosed narcoleptic until she suddenly sprang to her feet and launched into a speech about narcolepsy as a qualifying disorder for disability benefits. Since she displayed a post-attack lucidity uncharacteristic of people who suddenly fall asleep without warning

and wake up without recall, I saw it for the charade that it was. Hannah was undaunted. In spite of being unmasked, she continued to come to her weekly appointments, tattered paperback in hand. Not a session passed without her crumpling to the floor before its end.

I respected the gutsiness and creativity of her performance, as well as the tenacity with which she clung to it. I even thought I might have been able to help her channel her resourcefulness and determination into some alternative behavior that would serve her better.

As a result, I wasn't surprised to enter my office on the third Thursday in October and find her wig lying near the entrance, nor was I flustered to see Hannah herself sprawled on the floor next to the uncomfortable brown metal chair that flanked my desk. The only pieces out-of-order were that up until now, as per clinic policy, she had never arrived unescorted for her appointment, and she had never opened her session with an attack, preferring to reserve it in response to a question she didn't want to answer or an observation she didn't like.

"Hannah, you're early. Who brought you here?" I asked matter-of-factly, stepping over her body as if dodging a mud puddle. I unloaded a pile of case records onto my desk and plunked myself into the swivel chair behind it. Hannah lay on her side, her left arm stretched out on the floor above her clean-shaven, wigless head. Her right hand covered her face as if someone had just slapped her. Her short legs were scissored apart, the white unshaven skin showing in the space between the cuffs of her olive-drab-polyester trousers and fluorescent pink socks.

I glanced at the phone messages on my blotter then turned my full attention to her. Staring quietly at her small, frail, body, I felt like a mother at play with a child pretending to be invisible. I waited for Hannah to break the silence.

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“Hannah, I know the chair isn’t terribly comfortable, but it’s got to be better than the floor.” I anticipated her rise to her knees, then to her feet, almost welcoming the scripted tirade that would surely follow. Alarmed at the continued silence, I bolted from my chair and knelt next to my exasperating client. “Come on now. Up on the chair,” I pleaded. She didn’t move. I touched her wrist desperately searching for a pulse. I grabbed her shoulders and shook her. She flopped like an unwieldy bean bag. It wasn’t a game this time. Nor was it narcolepsy. Hannah was dead.

Chapter 2

The New York City Employee Mental Health Service was the Last Chance Café for The Big Apple's dysfunctional municipal employees. Through its clinic passed people who, for one reason or another, had allowed their job performance to slip below their ankles. Hannah had certainly belonged to the "below your ankles" crowd. I was curious why it had taken nineteen and one-half years for her incompetence to become notable until a colleague told me that her boss, Tom Humboldt, Director of the New York City Department of Public Property, was angling to be Commissioner of Land Acquisitions for the city. It was a political and financial plum. Only last October, President Gerald Ford's rebuff to a nearly bankrupt city's request for aid had been paraphrased in a much-heralded headline: "Drop Dead New York." Humboldt decided to capitalize on the city's financial crisis by chopping heads in his department to create an aura of fiscal responsibility and tough management. Hannah was part of what I had come to call his "Mission Swab the Decks," a phrase he had used more than once when I called him to discuss Hannah's referral.

"Just when I'm ready to swab the decks, some kiss-ass leftist politicians push through a policy requiring me to refer my slackers to your bleeding-heart operation before I can toss them overboard." Humboldt's attitude reflected the contempt many managers had for the EMHS. Our mandate was to help New York City's malfunctioning employees resolve whatever problems were preventing them from being exemplary civil servants. Some managers wanted and expected us to make their employees more employable, but most were like Humboldt. They saw us as a twisted hoop they had to hop through

before they could sack someone without incurring union action or bureaucratic reprisals.

I've been Chief Psychiatric Social Worker and Head of Clinical Services at the EMHS only slightly longer than Tom Humboldt has been at the DPP. Since Hannah Kovacs had been my client, I guess you could say I was the twisted hoop that Humboldt had to hop through. The likelihood that I could have helped her function at a level sufficient to keep her job had been remote from the start, but social workers are known to specialize in lost causes. I'm attracted by them to the point of addiction. Hannah's atrocious record of tardiness and absenteeism could have qualified for *The Guinness Book of Records*. The referral complaint suggested that she had sunk to a level of incompetence singular even in a sector not known for hard work and efficiency. I wasn't confident that I would be able to improve her work ethic, but I had hoped I could finagle a deal that would enable her to hang onto her position long enough to qualify for her pension. She needed a full twenty years to be vested. I can't say Hannah had done much to advance her own cause.

"The minute he came, he was out for me, you know? Like I was his special project." Hannah always leaned forward in her chair and thumped her right hand closed-palm on the desk as if playing a bongo drum. She was right about Humboldt being out to get her, but she had made herself an easy target.

"Hannah, unless Humboldt is lying, you show up at work about as often as a solar eclipse."

"Huh?"

"You're absent too much."

"And how 'bout you, Miss Know-It-All Psychiatrist? Would you come to work every day if all they made you do was shove a bunch of lousy papers into a bunch of lousy file folders?" Her Hungarian accent was especially pronounced when she got angry. I had given up

protesting that I was a social worker not a psychiatrist because the distinction seemed irrelevant to her.

"I'll talk to Humboldt. You promise to show up for work every day, and he commits to find something more interesting for you to do. What do you say?"

"You listen to me, doctor lady. There's nothing more interesting to do in that shit hole and you know it as well as me." She placed extra emphasis on the words "shit hole" and smiled broadly as though she had dared greatly and prevailed.

"And if you can't make this job work until you qualify for your pension in six months? What then?"

"Disability. I got a disability. They've got to pay me for that. You got to tell them to pay me for that."

We had gone round and round like a warped LP until Hannah decided it was time for her to fall off her chair and end the session. Nothing was going to change between Hannah and Humboldt, nor was it likely to change between her and me. I could have dealt with that failure, but the feeling I had contributed to her death by indulging her fake narcoleptic scenes didn't sit well. And then there was my nagging suspicion that something about her accidental death didn't add up.

Hannah had revealed precious little about herself prior to her death. Most of what I knew about her had been filtered through the prism of her boss's prejudiced description of her. I'd gone to see him only days before following yet another frustrating meeting with her. Now that she was dead, I reviewed my notes in the case record and relived my conversation with her supervisor. I'm schooled to be non-judgmental, but what I dictated made it clear that I hadn't liked Humboldt any more than Hannah had. Embarrassingly, in defiance of all my professional training, I hadn't concealed my contempt. My goal had been to get Humboldt to loosen up and back off. In effect, I asked

him to indulge her incompetence for another six months. No wonder he thought my salary was a waste of taxpayers' money.

"Well, if it isn't the esteemed Dr. Golda Rothman come to pay a visit," Humboldt announced sarcastically. He beckoned me from his office, walked me over to a large file cabinet, and ceremoniously opened the drawer. "Have a look. You'll see Miss Kovacs' interpretation of the word "file" is loosely construed to mean put the document in any damn drawer you please." Humboldt's bald, spindly presence hovered closely as I glanced through the file drawer. His stale Marlboro breath fell on my cheek in irritating puffs as he regaled me with his indignation.

"Whose side are you on now?" he asked in the sing-song cadence of a bratty four-year-old.

I closed the file drawer and faced the inelegant sight of Humboldt. I scanned upwards from the maroon polyester pants with frayed cuffs that spewed over scuffed brown shoes. His green nylon shirt, open at the collar, displayed sweaty tufts of Shinola black hair that looked like damp Brillo pads pasted on his chest. His shirt sleeves, rolled up to his elbows, exposed forearms as furry as Zippy the chimp.

"Well," I conceded, "It certainly isn't alphabetical, not the English one anyhow." This was understatement for a chaotic arrangement of folders that would have challenged the CIA, but I didn't want to give Humboldt too much satisfaction. He was clearly a gloater.

"The system, if in fact there is one, may make sense to her, but no one else understands it. And she's absent so damned often, you can't even ask her to find something, not that she'd give a shit if you were stupid enough to ask."

His vulgarity was monotonous but his point valid. I acknowledged it.

"Look, I appreciate your frustration. This can't be easy for you."

"You're damn right it isn't." He pounded his fist on the copy machine and spilled a half-empty cup of coffee that had been left there. A few drops splattered on my pants. I patted them dry, eyeballing him all the while as if to suggest that now he owed me one. Unsurprisingly, he hadn't framed it the same way. There wasn't even an apology.

"Something else. I think she takes documents home with her."

"What makes you think so?"

"I just know."

"Stealing government documents is a pretty serious charge. If you plan to use it against her officially, you'd better have some evidence to back it up." I waited in vain for him to elaborate.

"What would she want with documents from here anyway?"

"Kovacs will do anything to screw up the work of this department and make me look bad."

A pretty feeble rationale, I thought. I chalked it up to bluster and swagger and pushed my agenda.

"In six months, she'll qualify for retirement and be gone," I said. "It's an all or nothing system. If you fire her before she's vested, she'll lose everything. That's pretty ugly and unnecessary." Humboldt could have cared less about Hannah and wasted no time telling me.

"I'm not paid to protect the pension of a good-for-nothing, incompetent foreigner. My job is to run a tight ship and no bleeding heart can steer me off course."

He knew otherwise. Humboldt needed my cooperation and hated being dependent on a lowly social worker. I offered a compromise.

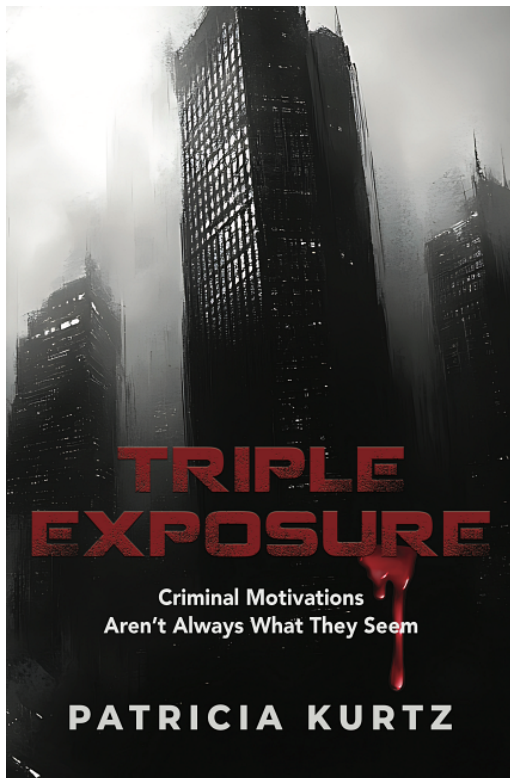
"Is there something more interesting and less destructive for her to do? I think she has chosen sabotage as an antidote to boredom. After all, the department has tolerated her for nearly twenty years."

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“I didn’t tolerate her for twenty years, and I don’t intend to tolerate her one day more than necessary. She’s got two weeks to shape up or she’s shipped out.”

“I stand corrected. You tolerated her for five years. It’s still an awfully long time for someone who is out to swab the decks. Why make her walk the plank now? Six months more won’t sink your boat, Admiral.”

If there were a group called Hotheads Anonymous, I’d have done well to join, but it was too late. My dig at his penchant for maritime clichés was worse than unprofessional. It was tactically stupid. He turned-on-his-heel and stormed down the hall. I turned-on-my-heel and slouched back to my Chambers Street office. Perhaps if I’d been more diplomatic with Humboldt, he’d have cut a deal, and Hannah wouldn’t have needed to fall off the chair one last time trying to manipulate me.



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